

## The U.S. Air Force in

# Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War

# A NARRATIVE CHRONOLOGY

Volume II: 1960–1961

Kenneth H. Williams



## Cover

Col. Benjamin H. King, the first commander of 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, better known as Jungle Jim, in Vietnam in December 1961 with the detachment that carried out the Farm Gate operation. King is wearing the hat that became the trademark of the air commandos, the organization that evolved from the 4400th CCTS. King is considered one of the founders of the air commandos, and the auditorium of 9th Special Operations Squadron at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, is named in his honor. Photo from Gleason, *Air Commando Chronicles*.

# VIETNAM FIFTIETH COMMEMORATION

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KENNETH H. WILLIAMS



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Col. Arthur P. Hurr, USAF, acting commander of 464th Troop Carrier Wing (Assault), welcomed President John F. Kennedy to Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, on October 12, 1961. Kennedy was there to review the U.S. Special Forces troops and training at Fort Bragg as the United States considered its counterinsurgency options in Vietnam. U.S. Army.

## INTRODUCTION

In December 1961, President John F. Kennedy's military advisors faced a dilemma. They wanted the commander in chief to be aware that the U.S. Air Force (USAF) unconventional warfare unit recently deployed to Vietnam, a detachment of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (CCTS), known as Jungle Jim, was going to begin offensive operations. The catch was that the advisors did not want the president to have to formally authorize missions. The plan, concocted by Kennedy's military aides, was to have Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, U.S. Army (USA) (Ret.), who was serving as military representative of the president, mention in a memorandum that Jungle Jim "combat missions," with combined USAF-Republic of Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) crews "as part of combat crew training requirements," would begin "soon." The aircraft would have VNAF markings. "If there is no reaction from the White House," wrote Lt. Cmdr. Worth H. Bagley, U.S. Navy (USN), Taylor's naval aide, "Saigon will be given an affirmative answer." With a two-sentence explanation in the December 21 Taylor memo for Kennedy, the USAF began somewhat officially sanctioned combat operations in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

This book documents how the United States reached the point where its leaders believed it needed to more actively engage in Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1.</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 1:754 (hereafter *FRUS* [date]; all volumes can be accessed online: https://history.state. gov/historicaldocuments). Bagley had written in a December 19 memorandum that McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor, was "aware of this procedure" to solicit Kennedy's tacit blessing, "which I gather is an agreed upon approach to avoid pinning down the President."

<sup>2.</sup> As far as the author can determine, the December 21 memorandum provided the first quasiauthorization from the White House or Pentagon level for U.S. service members to participate in an active manner in combat in Vietnam. It should be noted, however, that rules of engagement for the Farm Gate mission remained nebulous and under debate for the full term of the deployment. Unit commanders more or less operated under a don't ask/don't tell policy, with authority directly from Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, USAF chief of staff (*see Nov. 14, 27, Early Dec., Dec. 4, 6, 10, 15, 21, 26, 1961*). Troops assigned to Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Vietnam, were under explicit orders not to participate in combat, although U.S. advisors had been allowed to accompany South Vietnamese forces on operations since May 1959—a policy with which the U.S. Department of State apparently disagreed. Rules of engagement for U.S. Special Forces, who began deploying to Vietnam in 1961, stipulated that they were there in an advisory capacity. In practice, they did end up participating in some combat, as did MAAG personnel, but not with the type of authorization this memo provided to the Jungle Jim air commandos. U.S.-crewed Army helicopter units that began arriving in Vietnam in later, they gained authority to strike insurgent targets that were known to pose a threat. "Evolution of

Historians still debate when the Vietnam War actually began, but insurgent activity in the south increased markedly in the years 1960 and 1961, prompting an expanding U.S. response. The U.S. military also supported missions in Laos in the spring of 1961 and came close to deploying troops. The USAF had roles in all of these operations. The Air Force had eight times as many men in Vietnam at the end of 1961 as it did at the beginning of 1960, a reflection of the rapidly growing U.S. commitment.

In the latter part of the 1950s, the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration had paid diminishing attention to Southeast Asia as other trouble spots flared in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Stubborn but resilient President Ngo Dinh Diem had established and maintained more of an actual nation in South Vietnam than most had thought possible when agreements in 1954 at a peace conference at Geneva, Switzerland, divided the country. Diem ignored stipulations that required elections in 1956 to reunify Vietnam and began building his military to counter what most believed would be an inevitable clash whenever North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh decided to take action. As the French withdrew their troops and equipment during the last half of the decade, conceding the failure of their effort to recolonize Indochina, the United States increased its contributions to fill the void, bolstering Diem's noncommunist government and providing arms, aircraft, financing, and training for the South Vietnamese military.<sup>3</sup>

While U.S. investment in South Vietnam was significant, its footprint as of 1960 was small. The Geneva agreement limited the U.S. military to 342 uniformed personnel in the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). The United States had increased that total to 685 in 1956 with the creation of the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM), authorization for which was to expire in 1960. Of the 685 billets, the Air Force sections of MAAG and TERM totaled 102 men. Although the MAAG was a three-star command, headed by a USA lieutenant general, the senior USAF officer in the MAAG remained a colonel until the appointment of a brigadier

3. For an overview of this period, see the first book in this series, Kenneth H. Williams, *The U.S. Air Force in Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War, A Narrative Chronology*, Vol. 1: *The Early Years through 1959* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2019), https://media.defense.gov/2019/Feb/22/2002092352/-1/-1/1/USAF%20Vietnam%20Chronology%20v1.pdf. For a detailed look at how the region fit into the worldview of leaders of the outgoing Eisenhower administration and the incoming Kennedy one, see Paul M. Kattenburg, *The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1945–75* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1980), 69–105.

the Rules of Engagement for Southeast Asia, 1960–1965," Project CHECO report, September 30, 1966, U.S. Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA), Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, Iris no. 01010700, pp. 1–12; Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), 332, https://history.army.mil/html/books/091/91-1/CMH\_Pub\_91-1-B.pdf; Robert H. Whitlow, "The United States Military in South Vietnam, 1954–1960" (MA thesis, University of Kentucky, 1972), 94; Francis J. Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961–1971* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1973), 8, https://history.army.mil/html/books/090/90-23-1/CMH\_Pub\_90-23-1.pdf.



The USAF 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, known as Jungle Jim, deployed to South Vietnam in November 1961 to carry out an operation designated Farm Gate. The unit's principal fighter was the U.S. Navy T–28 (redesignated as TF–28), shown here at Bien Hoa in November 1961 soon after the Jungle Jim airmen arrived. *USAF*.

general in December 1961. There was also a USAF air attaché and assistant attachés assigned to the U.S. embassy in Saigon. They had credentials for the embassies in Cambodia and Laos as well and flew diplomats among the capital cities. In Laos, the United States had established a Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) in lieu of a MAAG because the Geneva accords excluded foreign troops from that country. Out-of-uniform U.S. military personnel staffed the PEO, which had a small Air Force section. A USAF detachment assigned to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) also established a base in Thailand in January 1960 from which it conducted air operations in Laos and coordinated Air America flights.

The primary mission of USAF airmen assigned to MAAG-Vietnam was training and support of the VNAF. This fledgling service had total staffing of around 5,000 during the period covered in this book, a tiny subset of the 150,000-man Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The Geneva agreements prohibited the introduction of jet aircraft into Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, so the small VNAF squadrons used propeller-driven C–47s for transport and L–19s for liaison and observation duties. Antiquated USN F–8Fs served as their fighters, replaced by AD–6s in 1960–61. Even as conditions worsened in Vietnam during 1961, the VNAF's single fighter squadron flew only 251 combat sorties for the entire year. The VNAF also had an H–19 helicopter squadron, which began upgrading to H–34s at the end of 1960.

The Army-dominated MAAG prepared the ARVN for a conventional conflict, fearing a North Vietnamese advance across the 17th parallel that divided north and south similar to what noncommunist forces faced in Korea in 1950. The MAAG and its commander, Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams, USA, had nothing to do with the paramilitary Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps until 1961. Both the MAAG and the ARVN had very



John F. Kennedy and Dwight D. Eisenhower during the transition briefing for the incoming Kennedy administration on January 19, 1961. Eisenhower spent more time discussing Laos than any other subject they covered. He did not mention Vietnam at all. *National Archives.* 

limited views of the role of the VNAF, frustrating members of that service and their USAF advisors. As one USAF officer who arrived in 1960 observed, "it was all Army from A to Z, and the Air Force had absolutely very little say-so."<sup>4</sup>

General Williams, who had served in Saigon since 1955, had developed a close relationship with Diem, unlike the U.S. ambassador, Elbridge Durbrow, who irritated Diem with persistent calls for reform in the South Vietnamese government. Both Durbrow and the CIA were deeply suspicious of Diem's influential brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who controlled the political and intelligence operations of the Can Lao Party, the organization the Ngo brothers used to maintain Diem's power base and enforce loyalty to the government. Durbrow also clashed with Williams, who resented Durbrow's control over the MAAG as leader of the country team, which encompassed the embassy, the MAAG, the CIA station, and the civilian economic aid program. Williams thought Durbrow "better suited to be the senior salesman in a good ladies shoe store than to be representing the U.S. in an Asian country."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4.</sup> Butler B. Toland Jr., interview with Lt. Col. Robert G. Zimmerman, November 18, 1974, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 01016509, p. 41 (hereafter Toland interview).

<sup>5.</sup> Quote from David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam*, 1953–1961 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 185–86.

At the beginning of 1960, Diem and Williams declared that South Vietnam was the most stable it had been in several years. They were wrong. Southern insurgents had been building their organization and their numbers, and a series of attacks they mounted beginning in January 1960 caught the South Vietnamese and Americans off guard. The communist government in the north had to be to blame, according to Diem, who during this period started insisting that Hanoi was coordinating the southern activity and that North Vietnamese regulars were coming down the barely developed Ho Chi Minh Trail to reinforce the group he derisively called the Viet Cong (VC). Neither supposition was correct—in fact, Hanoi was trying to discourage its southern compatriots from engaging in wider warfare—but the MAAG had no intelligence section and had to depend on the ARVN for its information, which Nhu and the Can Lao made sure supported Diem's assertions.

As troubles percolated in Vietnam, they boiled over in Laos, where a complicated three-party civil war erupted in August 1960. The United States aided two of the factions—the Royal Lao Army and a neutralist splinter organization—until the neutralist group moved to align with the communist Pathet Lao, to which the Soviets began flying aid in the fall. A USAF air attaché provided the first concrete documentation of the airlift when he photographed an Il–14 transport over the Plain of Jars. Direct Soviet involvement ratcheted up U.S. concern and engagement, as did rumors of infiltration by North Vietnamese personnel. In his transition brief with Kennedy in January 1961, Eisenhower spent the most time talking about Laos, where the former general believed the United States might soon have to send troops. He did not mention Vietnam at all.

Kennedy had visited Vietnam in 1951 while he was a U.S. congressman and had met Diem in 1957 when the Vietnamese leader was in Washington, so he was aware of what had been transpiring in Southeast Asia over the previous decade. He did not appreciate how much the situation there had deteriorated, however, until he read a January 1961 report by an Air Force officer, Brig. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale, who had deployed on a fact-finding tour earlier that month. Lansdale had more familiarity with Vietnam than nearly anyone else in Washington, as he had served there on assignment with the CIA in 1954 through 1956, during which time he had worked closely with Diem. In 1960 and 1961, the Department of Defense assigned Lansdale to various task forces related to irregular warfare in both Southeast Asia and Cuba. His influence on Vietnam policy discussions during this period far exceeded his rank, as Diem, Kennedy, and the MAAG commanders communicated with him directly at times, and Lansdale's memoranda on Vietnam and counterinsurgency subjects got read at the highest levels. Many in the State Department, and increasingly

in the military, viewed him and his ideas with skepticism, though, in part because of his association with the CIA. $^6$ 

During the early months of 1961, Laos occupied significant Kennedy administration attention. As the noncommunist force there lost ground and international powers dickered over a prospective peace conference, the United States inserted Marines into Thailand, just across the border from Vientiane, to support Air America operations in USAF-provided planes and U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) helicopters. The USAF detachment in Thailand assigned to the CIA received B–26s for potential bombing missions over Laos, as well as out-of-uniform USAF pilots to fly them. As the United States considered how much it would do, a cease-fire agreement on May 3 forestalled larger-scale U.S. intervention and shifted U.S. focus back to Vietnam.

With the failed Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba in April 1961, the lack of success in Laos, and the growing crisis in Europe that would culminate in construction of the Berlin Wall starting in August, Kennedy and his men looked increasingly at Vietnam as a place where the United States would have to make a stand in the wider Cold War. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson traveled to Saigon in May 1961 as a show of support for Diem and his government, and the United States committed during the year to financing ARVN force expansions that would total 50,000 men. Increased insurgent activity in South Vietnam that began in September 1961 seemed to confirm Western fears of a concerted international communist effort there,

6. Throughout the period covered in this book, Lansdale served in uniform and worked in the Pentagon. He was assigned to the Office of Special Operations within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, supervised by Deputy Secretary James H. Douglas Jr. during the Eisenhower administration and his successor, Roswell L. Gilpatric, under President Kennedy. Both men liked Lansdale and gave him considerable latitude. Lansdale ostensibly was the deputy in the Office of Special Operations, under Gen. Graves B. Erskine, USMC (Ret.), but Erskine spent a considerable amount of time on convalescent leave and retired in 1961, with Lansdale running the office in his absence and becoming director when Erskine left. Questions persist over whether/how much Lansdale also was working for the CIA at this time. Historian Jonathan Nashel attempted to track this issue and found that the CIA had removed numerous documents that might have provided more detail. As Lansdale biographer Cecil B. Currey put it, "While [Lansdale] was never anyone's lap dog, and while he may no longer have worked directly for CIA after his return from Vietnam, it is evident that he certainly shared information with the Agency when he believed it would be useful to them." One instance covered herein was when Lansdale met with Tran Le Xuan (Madame Nhu) in Washington (see Sept. 6, 1960). He reported details of their talk to a CIA desk officer, not to the Defense or State Department. In the fall of 1960, however, Lansdale was also doing much from his office in the Pentagon to diminish or deny CIA access to U.S. military assets for a proposed CIA-coordinated invasion of Cuba-the Bay of Pigs-which Lansdale thought was quixotic. When Lansdale traveled to Vietnam at the beginning of 1961, the CIA was as skeptical of what Lansdale was doing there as the State Department and the U.S. military were (see Jan. 2-14, 1961). In a curious twist, and an assignment Lansdale did not relish, Kennedy pulled Lansdale off of Vietnam in November 1961 and assigned him more directly in a CIA lane, coordinating efforts related to Cuba that became known as Operation Mongoose. Jonathan Nashel, Edward Lansdale's Cold War (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 77-78, 85-91; Cecil B. Currey, Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 189-93 (quote, 193), 207-16, 239-42, 384 n. 36; Max Boot, The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam (New York: Liveright, 2018), 314-16, 380-85.



Edward G. Lansdale, USAF, shown as a colonel but promoted to brigadier general in 1960, had worked closely with South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem in 1954– 56 while Lansdale was detailed to the CIA. Lansdale was one of the most influential voices in U.S. government debates in 1960–61 about what to do in Vietnam. His report from a January 1961 fact-finding mission was the first detailed document President Kennedy read about Vietnam after taking office that same month. USAF.

and Kennedy in October sent a senior advisory team led by Maxwell Taylor and Walt W. Rostow to survey the situation and make recommendations on how the United States should proceed. Taylor suggested deployment of 8,000 U.S. troops, a plan Kennedy resisted, although the president approved substantial increases in other forms of aid.<sup>7</sup>

Several significant operations the USAF would undertake in Vietnam over the following three years had their origins in the debates that took place in the final months of 1961. The United States had deployed 400 USA Special Forces to Vietnam in May of that year at the same time the USAF had underway an effort to develop similar unconventional capabilities for its service. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, who became USAF chief of staff in June, had ordered the standing up of the 4400th CCTS and in the fall

<sup>7.</sup> In December 1960, North Vietnam gave more formal structure to the southern communist organizing and insurgency with the founding of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), with the designation of the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) following in February 1961. For the purposes of this study, after those dates, NLF is used in reference to broader communist organizing and community infiltration in the south, while PLAF is used for insurgent military action and troop strength. Contemporary U.S. and South Vietnamese quotes refer to both groups as Viet Cong or VC.



Eugene M. Zuckert, secretary of the Air Force, swearing in Gen. Curtis E. LeMay as USAF chief of staff in front of President Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, members of Congress, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Outgoing USAF chief of staff Gen. Thomas D. White is in the rear by the column. This ceremony took place at the White House on June 30, 1961. *Kennedy Library.* 

began advocating with the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that a detachment of that unit be sent to Vietnam. That force, given the operational code name Farm Gate, reached Bien Hoa airfield in November. The following month, the USAF began preparing a C–123 squadron for deployment for what became known as Project Mule Train. The USAF's Special Aerial Spray Flight (SASF) program also readied a detachment to execute what would become one of the most controversial missions of the war, Operation Ranch Hand.

The die for massive U.S. involvement in Vietnam by 1965 was not completely cast in 1960–61, but the increasing levels of commitment portended what was to come, as did growing communist engagement.

\* \* \*

As noted in the first volume of this chronology, this work seeks to document, and to honor the service and sacrifice of, U.S. airmen for the full span of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. It ranges beyond strictly Air Force topics to provide a framework of context for why U.S. service

members deployed to the region. The study significantly expands the story of the USAF in Southeast Asia during the period covered and includes many details not found in previous books. It draws heavily on documents and interviews in the Air Force archives, held by the Air Force Historical Research Agency, many of which have been recently declassified. These include interviews with Generals Williams and Lansdale, Ambassadors Durbrow and Frederick E. Nolting Jr., and Farm Gate principals Col. Benjamin H. King and Brig. Gen. Rollen H. "Buck" Anthis. There are also interviews with Lt. Col. Butler B. Toland Jr., the air attaché who photographed the Soviet Il-14 over Laos and was in Saigon at the time of the coup attempt against Diem's government in November 1960, and Col. Harry S. Coleman, who deployed to Laos during the first part of 1961 to coordinate all air operations. This publication also has benefitted from the work of several scholars over the last couple of decades in Vietnamese, Chinese, and Russian archives that has greatly enlarged the international context for developments in Southeast Asia.

This book is a product of the Air Force Historical Support Division, under the direction of Dr. Richard Wolf, and owes much to the input of the staff. Mr. David Byrd, Ms. Patricia Engel, Ms. Yvonne Kinkaid, Ms. Terry Kiss, Dr. Christopher Koontz, and Dr. Jean Mansavage all made research and editorial contributions to this project.



# Insurgency Shakes South Vietnam January–July 1960

The fledgling nation of South Vietnam—officially the Republic of Vietnam (RVN)—appeared to be in good shape as 1960 opened, much better than the United States could have envisioned five years earlier when it increased its involvement there as the French withdrew. President Ngo Dinh Diem had built what seemed to be a reasonably stable government, MAAG-Vietnam was providing training for the 150,000-man ARVN, and anti-government insurgent activity in the provinces had been minimal. Diem was particularly proud of his agroville program, launched in mid-1959 and concentrated largely in the Mekong delta area south of Saigon, which regrouped peasants into agricultural collectives that would boost development and also be more secure from communist infiltration.

Southern insurgents, who Diem and the Americans called Viet Cong (VC), had been more active than the ARVN's limited intelligence indicated, however, and in January 1960, they launched a series of attacks that caught the South Vietnamese government and its allies completely off guard. Diem, who was desperate not to acknowledge internal dissent, began pointing to Hanoi and North Vietnamese infiltrators as the moving forces behind the aggression.

As sporadic fighting continued into the spring, Diem began calling the conflict a "war" and requesting increased U.S. aid, including upgraded fighter aircraft and helicopters. Diem also started advocating for training more of his troops in counter-guerrilla measures, a position not shared by Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams, the MAAG-Vietnam commander, who firmly believed that the primary threat remained a large-scale, conventional-force invasion from the north. The South Vietnamese president clashed even more with Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, who called for governmental reforms to address what he and many at the U.S. embassy saw as growing internal discontent.

In Washington, an Air Force officer, Edward Lansdale, who the USAF promoted to brigadier general in the spring, emerged as a key voice in

shaping U.S. policy on Vietnam. While Lansdale shared concerns about the lack of emphasis on counter-guerrilla training and the need for South Vietnamese governmental reform, his friendships with Diem and Williams complicated the positions he was willing to take.

## 1960

**January**: After months of upgrading the sparse support and housing facilities at the airfield at Takhli, Thailand, Detachment 2 of 1045th Operations Evaluations and Training (OET) Group relocated there from Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan. Det 2 was a USAF unconventional warfare unit assigned to the CIA, commanded by Maj. Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt, a USAF officer detailed to the CIA. Det 2 had been using Takhli, about 120 miles north of Bangkok, for staging of an aid airlift to Tibet, but the main reason for the unit's move was for it to oversee covert air operations in Laos (*see Mar.–Apr.*). Det 2 reported directly to CIA headquarters but also coordinated with Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), from which it received aircraft, personnel, and supplies.<sup>1</sup>

**January 4**: In a meeting with Adm. Arthur W. Radford, USN (Ret.), former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem declared that "the Communists have now given up hope of controlling the countryside because of the presence of young men trained in guerrilla tactics." Diem spoke of the insurgency as an administrative problem, to be dealt with by building roads, training local militias, and expanding his government's agroville program, which it had begun in the summer of 1959. Elbridge Durbrow, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon since 1957, wrote in March 1960 that "Diem during the autumn of 1959 and even into early January 1960 described in detail to me and others how much better internal security had become despite the Viet Cong efforts. He particularly praised the fine anti-Communist work being done by the recently organized youth groups and in general seemed to believe that the situation was more in hand than ever."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1.</sup> Warren A. Trest, *Air Commando One: Heinie Aderholt and America's Secret Wars* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 83, 89–90, 97–99; Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>2.</sup> Spector, *Advice and Support*, 335 (1st quote); *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:296 (2d quote); Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:247. In a 1970 interview, Durbrow said the agroville concept was "a beautiful idea" but "awfully expensive and too elaborate. We said we couldn't go along with it and help you very much on it because it would take too darn long and should be done on a much less elaborate scale." Elbridge Durbrow, interview with Maj. Richard B. Clement and Maj. Samuel E. Riddlebarger, April 27, 1970, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 00904171, pp. 23–24 (hereafter Durbrow interview).



An agroville under construction in Vi Thanh, Phong Dinh Province, about seventyfive miles southwest of Saigon. South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem saw these types of development programs as a key part of his strategy to confront communist insurgency, but poor design of the settlements and forced relocation of peasants led to discontent and more infiltration. U.S. Army.

William E. Colby, then assistant CIA station chief in Saigon, noted that the South Vietnamese government saw development programs as the "main strategy" to "offer a better future than the Communists could." The rural population had always viewed government officials as "exploiters of power," however, dating back to French and imperial times. The agroville program, in fact, was doing more to contribute to rural discontent than it was to collective security. Local officials failed to explain the purposes of relocation; instead, Colby wrote, "they simply dragooned peasants out of their existing homes and moved them to the new sites selected by the officials." Each family received land by its hut to grow vegetables, which proved to be the "fatal flaw" of the scheme, according to Colby. "The garden plots meant that the houses were separated by a considerable distance from one another. Spread over a large area, the community was difficult to defend against penetration by visiting Communist guerrilla and organizing teams." Peasants not coopted by the insurgents soon tired of their new surroundings and decamped for their old villages along the canals of the Mekong delta.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3.</sup> William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books, 1989), 70–72. For more on problems with the agroville program, see Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 142–43; John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 68–69.



Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams, USA, served as MAAG-Vietnam commander from November 1955 through August 1960. He developed a close relationship with Diem but clashed often with the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, Elbridge Durbrow. U.S. Army.

Durbrow noted many of the same issues in a communication with the State Department in February. Representatives in the countryside had not "properly explained the basic motivations and aims of the government," which was to "better their lot." Local officials "have concentrated on getting the job done by forcing the peasants to work excessively on community development projects or have in general been too autocratic in their dealings with the people." Instead of "winning over the rural population by these very worthwhile schemes, the bureaucrats have tended, by their 'get the job done' methods, to antagonize a considerable section of the rural population, who therefore are not cooperating with the government in its anti-Communist campaign." Durbrow concluded that it was possible that the insurgents were "taking advantage of this growing attitude."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4.</sup> *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:285. Durbrow wrote the State Department on March 2 that "in regard to the arbitrary and roughshod methods used by provincial officials, this may stem primarily from the fact that Diem, in his hurry to get things done, gives these officials almost impossible tasks. Too often either in the military or in the civil service the officer who makes a not too grave mistake or does not get almost impossible things done on time is summarily dismissed. Therefore there is no incentive for them to think of anything else except to carry out almost impossible orders." Ibid., 298 (quote), 314–15, 326–27. For the U.S. embassy's thoughts on the agroville program as of June 1960, see Ibid., 485–89.

**January 7**: Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams, commander of MAAG-Vietnam since November 1955, stated that "the internal security situation here now, although at times delicate, is better than it has been at any time in the last two or three years."<sup>5</sup>

The MAAG had no intelligence section, and Williams showed little interest in intelligence collection and reports (*see Feb. 29*), so increasing insurgent activity during the month caught the MAAG off guard. The CIA station in Saigon accurately predicted an attack in Tay Ninh Province (*see Jan. 26*), but Williams ignored the CIA information and did not share it with the ARVN.<sup>6</sup>

Also on the 7th, Williams and Ambassador Durbrow met with Diem along with Wilbur M. Brucker, the U.S. secretary of the Army. According to Williams's account, when Brucker advised Diem that South Vietnam should be developing its airports to make them capable of handling jet aircraft, Durbrow told Brucker that he could not address that question. The two exchanged words, and Brucker walked out of the meeting. Since the Geneva accords prohibited the introduction of jets into Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the ambassador believed the question was a diplomatic issue, not a military one.<sup>7</sup>

At the request of Vietnamese officials, Brucker returned to resume his conversation with Diem without Durbrow or Williams present. They revisited a topic from the earlier meeting: renewed pressure from the International Control Commission (ICC), which policed compliance with the Geneva accords, concerning the U.S. military footprint in South Vietnam. Under the guise of the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM), the United States in 1956 had doubled the number of troops allowed in-country by the Geneva agreement. When pressed in recent months by the ICC about when the "temporary" mission would end, the United States responded that it would draw down by the end of 1960. A member of Diem's cabinet told Brucker that Durbrow had set this date with Williams's concurrence, although Williams later claimed that Durbrow had not coordinated with him. The question of whether and how to adjust the MAAG personnel level remained under discussion through the spring (*see Mar. 17, May 6*).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5.</sup> Spector, Advice and Support, 334.

<sup>6.</sup> Williams later claimed that he had not seen the Tay Ninh report, which he had actually initialed. Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam*, 1954–63 (Washington, DC: CIA, 2000), 134, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/2\_CIA\_AND\_THE\_HOUSE\_OF\_NGO.pdf. See also Samuel T. Williams, interview with Capt. Ralph G. Swenston, August 19, 1970, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 00904333, pp. 78, 109 (hereafter Williams interview).

<sup>7.</sup> Ronald B. Frankum Jr., Vietnam's Year of the Rat: Elbridge Durbrow, Ngo Dinh Diem, and the Turn in U.S. Relations, 1959–1961 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 22.

<sup>8.</sup> Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 22–23. For the origins of TERM, see Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:216–17.

January 17: In Ben Tre Province, in the Mekong delta region around sixty miles southwest of Saigon, insurgent attacks against police and Self-Defense Corps forces began. These resulted in temporary gains that the ARVN soon turned back but sparked uprisings in other southern provinces that spread across the Mekong delta. The Hanoi government had not authorized these engagements and remained unwilling to commit to more aggressive tactics in South Vietnam, increasing tensions with southernbased communist leaders. Diem considered the communist strikes as acts of desperation by a foe he thought was considerably weakened by his government's development programs (see Jan. 4), but they proved to be the first round of semi-coordinated, sustained aggression. General Williams later observed that the insurgents' "success whipping those paramilitary forces . . . gave them encouragement and also made the populace think that the Government of Vietnam was helpless." Nguyen Thi Dinh, one of the insurgent leaders in Ben Tre, said that in the first engagement, her group, which included many women and children, attacked a Self-Defense Corps post. Although the insurgents had no guns, they overran the camp and captured thirty rifles, which they parceled out to villages in the province. Within ten days, they had driven troops out of a dozen villages and captured several hundred weapons.<sup>9</sup>

**January 26**: Four insurgent companies totaling around 200 men launched an assault against the headquarters of the ARVN 32d Regiment in the village of Trang Sup in Tay Ninh Province, about fifty miles northwest of Saigon. The intruders killed 40 ARVN troops, wounded 26, destroyed the battalion headquarters and two barracks, and captured an estimated 600 firearms. An assessment by the U.S. country team in Vietnam, which included the embassy, the MAAG, and the CIA station, observed that the attack was a "dramatic illustration" of the "increasingly aggressive tactics of the Viet Cong" and of the difficulty the South Vietnamese government was having in "controlling the internal security situation." The incident demonstrated the "audacity of the Viet Cong," the "likelihood of VC infiltration into ARVN," and probable "secret support of the VC by some

<sup>9.</sup> Pierre Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 73–74; Edward Miller, Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 205; Mark Moyar, Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 87–88; FRUS 1958–60, 1:285; Williams interview (quote); Nguyen Thi Dinh, interview with WGBH for Vietnam: A Television History, February 16, 1981, http://openvalt.wgbh.org/catalog/V\_FFE679CC583A4C0DBE2EB15057EC5FCE (hereafter Nguyen Thi Dinh interview); Military History Institute of Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press, 2002), 60–62 (hereafter Vietnam); Wallace J. Thies, When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964–1968 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 237–39.





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of the local populace." This and other guerrilla actions in early 1960 led the country team to conclude that the insurgent issue had escalated from a potential long-term threat to Diem's government to become its "No. 1 problem." As William Colby of the CIA later put it, "By early 1960, South Vietnam was beginning to feel—and show—the results of the Communist organizational and proselytizing campaign and its associated attacks." This particular assault at Trang Sup "inspire[ed] fear in Saigon circles." General Williams wrote a former MAAG colleague that the "brazenness of this attack shocked the Vietnamese to the roots."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10.</sup> Spector, Advice and Support, 338; Moyar, Triumph Forsaken, 88–89; FRUS 1958–60, 1:303 (1st–7th quotes), 344 (10th quote); Colby, Lost Victory, 69 (8th quote), 72 (9th quote). The State Department requested the assessment on January 29, but the embassy did not send the full report to Washington until March 7. The Vietnamese official history of the conflict observed that this engagement "sent shock waves throughout the region, frightening enemy troops, especially the regional forces and militia troops in the villages and hamlets, and giving powerful encouragement to the masses to rise up against the regime." This work claimed a much higher casualty number—500 ARVN troops killed or captured—as well as confiscation of 1,500 weapons. Victory in Vietnam, 59.

**January 27**: Ambassador Durbrow cabled Adm. Harry D. Felt, commander in chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC), whose theater of operations included Southeast Asia, that the South Vietnamese government was asking for deployment of U.S. Special Forces to train its Civil Guard in "anti-guerrilla" tactics. Felt turned down the request, to Durbrow's dismay (*see Feb. 15*).<sup>11</sup>

On paper, South Vietnam had roughly 50,000 troops in the Civil Guard and another 50,000 in the even more loosely organized Self-Defense Corps, which was little more than barely trained local militias. Training, organization, and institutional control of these forces had been ongoing issues for several years. At this time, neither the Civil Guard nor the Self-Defense Corps was directly associated with the ARVN. The MAAG did not want to train the Civil Guard while it remained under the interior ministry, and Diem did not want to transfer it to the defense ministry, an impasse that held up U.S. training for the Civil Guard for the rest of the year (*see Sept. 1, 6, 13, Nov. 27*).<sup>12</sup>

**February 12**: Col. Edward G. Lansdale, USAF, who was assigned to the Office of the Secretary of Defense as deputy assistant for special operations, wrote a memorandum on the security question in Vietnam. He noted that recent reports indicated "an increase in Communist activity which has the stated objective of overthrowing Vietnam's government by subversion and paramilitary force. The situation is said to have been caused by a strengthening of Communist guerrilla cadres and by weaknesses in Vietnam's security forces." Lansdale argued that while "the security of Vietnam may appear to be a military problem," he thought "the fundamental of the Vietnamese situation is a political one. Without a sound political basis for operations, military actions can only provide a temporary solution."<sup>13</sup>

Lansdale observed that "Communism breeds on discontent. In Vietnam, the Communists have found some discontent with political institutions supporting Diem and are enlarging upon this discontent among the people. In so doing, they are creating a popular base to support their Communist subversive and paramilitary forces and to hide them when necessary. This will increasingly pit the military against the people, unless corrected." The fundamental problem was that the "political institutions supporting Diem have a basic hard core which operates clandestinely." In explaining how this situation had developed, Lansdale wrote that "all of Vietnam's political leaders got their early political education in revolutionary atmosphere of

<sup>11.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:287.

<sup>12.</sup> Williams, USAF in Southeast Asia, 1:234–35; Spector, Advice and Support, 320–25, 363; Anderson, Trapped by Success, 134; Miller, Misalliance, 192–94.

<sup>13.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:279.



Adm. Harry D. Felt, USN, served as commander in chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC) from 1958 to 1964. With Southeast Asia in his theater of operations, Felt was a central figure in the decisionmaking chain as the United States dealt with increasing strife in Vietnam and Laos during his tenure. *National Archives*.

underground activity, with cellular organization for security, and with a deceptive appearance on the surface. In this respect, they were not too different from the Viet Minh Communists, nor too different from Americans in the Colonies just before our own Revolution." He believed that "it was largely by a combination of U.S. encouragement and acceptance that clandestine political organization has continued as a way of Vietnamese political life."<sup>14</sup>

While Lansdale's diagnosis showed more insight into the actual situation than many other contemporary reports, he had only vague recommendations for rectification, such as that correction should be offered "in an atmosphere of trust and understanding" and that the U.S. military position in Vietnam needed to be "used wisely in support of desired political action." Lansdale warned that if the United States was "clumsy" in discouraging current South Vietnamese governmental practices, "we could cause serious disunity at a fateful time." Lansdale remained convinced that the United States could make more headway with Diem

14. Ibid., 1:280.



Gen. Nathan F. Twining, USAF (*left*), who served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff through September 1960, presenting an award to Col. Edward G. Lansdale. As military engagements in Vietnam increased, Lansdale argued that the fundamental issues were rooted in political problems. *USAF*.

by gently encouraging reforms, in contrast to the more direct approach of Ambassador Durbrow (*see Apr. 7, Sept. 16, Oct. 14, Dec. 31*).<sup>15</sup>

Also on February 12, Durbrow met with Diem. According to the ambassador, the South Vietnamese president "is now convinced that the immediate problem facing Vietnam is the stepped up Viet Cong guerrilla operations which will probably continue for a long time and strongly inferred he now believed too much attention had been given to training the ARVN along conventional lines." In a shift from what Diem had been telling Durbrow, "he stated that the Viet Cong had recently been reinforced by well-trained forces from North Vietnam, who had come via Laos and Cambodia." Diem increasingly would make the claim that the primary threat was external—coming from North Vietnam—not indigenous discontent. The president "made it clear that in his estimation the recent flurry of Viet Cong activities was basically a somewhat desperate operation, an effort on the part of the Viet Cong to disrupt the progress

<sup>15.</sup> Ibid., 1:281. For differing scholarly opinions on whether the United States should have pressed Diem harder, see Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, particularly pp. 201–2; Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*; Michael R. Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy: Elbridge Durbrow, Frederick Nolting, and the U.S. Commitment to Diem's Vietnam, 1957–61," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32 (June 2002): 229–55.

already made and prevent planned progress from taking place." Durbrow noted that he was "not sure this is true, but it may have played a part in the Commie calculations." The ambassador feared, however, that aggressive development efforts were antagonizing people in outlying provinces, thus making insurgent recruitment more fertile (*see Jan. 4*). Diem did seem "cognizant of the need not only to protect the rural population but to do more to win them over." Durbrow told the State Department he believed it was "essential to redouble our efforts" to encourage Diem "to put more emphasis on the people's needs rather than thinking solely in terms of armed force to meet the Viet Cong threat." The ambassador also thought the MAAG needed to reassess the "type of training and organization of the ARVN" in light of increasing insurgent activity.<sup>16</sup>

The insurgents encouraged the thinking that there was an infusion of troops and arms from North Vietnam. According to southern revolutionary leader Nguyen Thi Dinh, "We taught our people the northern accent to make the Saigon soldiers really believe that these were revolutionary troops coming back from the North. Then we sent the members of the families of Saigon soldiers to inform them that a lot of revolutionary troops had returned from the North, armed with all types of guns."<sup>17</sup>

The ruses worked, as General Williams remained convinced that the conflict was "dictated and controlled entirely and exclusively out of Hanoi." He stated in a 1970 interview that he "never bought this idea" that the fight was "an interior civil war between South Vietnamese and Viet Cong in South Vietnam." During his tenure, which ended in August 1960 (*see Aug. 31*), he had "no doubt in my mind that infiltration was coming in there, but I had no knowledge of any regular troops—regular North Vietnamese troops." He added that he "didn't draw much distinction between the regulars and the Viet Cong because I thought maybe large numbers of Viet Cong were trained up north and then infiltrated in." Williams noted that since the MAAG had no intelligence section (*see Feb. 29*), he was at the mercy of whatever information the ARVN could provide, "and theirs was extremely limited." Williams did not know what, if any, intelligence the ARVN was getting out of North Vietnam because he never saw any from there.<sup>18</sup>

**February 15**: Without consulting U.S. officials in the MAAG or the embassy, Diem ordered commanders of ARVN divisions and military regions

<sup>16.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:284–86. A Diem confidant did note that at some point toward the end of the month, the South Vietnamese president seemed "profoundly disturbed" by the people's disaffection toward the government. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 183. For the actual indigenous roots of the insurgency at this time, see Prados, *Vietnam*, 66.

<sup>17.</sup> Nguyen Thi Dinh interview.

<sup>18.</sup> Williams interview, 75 (4th-6th quotes), 118 (1st-3d quotes).



Ngo Dinh Diem led South Vietnam from 1954 until his death in a November 1963 coup. He had a close relationship with the MAAG commander, Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams, but not with Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow, who continually pushed him to make reforms in his government. *National Archives*.

to start forming 131-man counterinsurgency ranger companies, sparking disagreement between the MAAG and the South Vietnamese government over plans, training, and intentions for these forces (*see Mar. 10, 25*). General Williams wrote a former MAAG colleague that since Diem's plan "would skim off the cream of officers, NCOs, and privates, I'm doing my best to sabotage the project and may be successful as none of the corps or division commanders want to lose these people." Ambassador Durbrow also tried to dissuade Diem from implementing the program, in part because he and others, including Admiral Felt, came to see it as a backdoor effort to add 10,000 to 20,000 troops to the 150,000 the United States was already funding. Debate on this issue continued until April 6, when Diem informed Williams that he had no intention of exceeding the 150,000-man limit. He still wanted to raise a force of 3,000 commandos, which he hoped could be absorbed into the small Vietnamese marine corps.<sup>19</sup>

Also on February 15, Felt cabled the Pentagon in response to the South Vietnamese request for U.S. Special Forces to train the Civil Guard (see

<sup>19.</sup> Spector, Advisory Years, 349–57; FRUS 1958–60, 1:290, 298, 321–22, 325–26, 328–29, 331–32, 343 (quote), 348–49, 374, 379. Ambassador Durbrow and Diem agreed on February 12 that "more emphasis should be given to anti-guerrilla training and an organizational set-up better suited to meet the unconventional threat," but only in vague terms. FRUS 1958–60, 1:286. Despite Diem's assurances, by June, his commando units did put the ARVN over the 150,000-man cap. Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 75.

Jan. 27). A covert deployment "under civilian cover" was of "questionable advisability," according to Felt, who noted the "demonstrated difficulty [in] maintaining [the] plausibility [of] such cover" with the ostensibly civilian Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) in Laos. At the same time, overt introduction of uniformed personnel would violate Geneva restrictions on foreign troop levels, and "no reasonable denial could be made to this charge." Felt had no other suggestions to offer but did note the possibility of Special Forces training Civil Guard personnel on Okinawa. Durbrow protested Felt's decision, writing the State Department that "I firmly believe if we cannot improvise and show some flexibility in this and other matters, merely because [the] proposed action is unorthodox, we will not be able to meet [this] serious internal threat or other objectives and our efforts here will fail to meet desired goals." Durbrow said senior South Vietnamese officials "had no concern" for possible Geneva violations and that he had discussed the possibility of bringing in Special Forces trainers as military attachés assigned to the embassy. The ambassador indicated that General Williams agreed with the thinking that Special Forces could be sent on temporary duty (TDY) as attachés.<sup>20</sup>

Colonel Lansdale echoed Durbrow's call, writing that the Office of Special Operations "concurs in this recommendation" to deploy Special Forces as trainers. He stated that "we believe this is a real opportunity to assist the Vietnamese to meet a Communist threat and to gain valuable experience in a type of warfare which is still too-little understood by Americans." Lansdale also explained that "counter-guerrilla" should be the term used for the type of training under discussion, as "anti-guerrilla" had "come to mean operations which protect rear areas from guerrilla harassment during combat against regular forces." What the South Vietnamese needed to undertake were operations that were "counter-guerrilla" in nature, "against an enemy force which is entirely guerrilla, and who combines political subversion with his paramilitary actions. This enemy is 'everywhere,' not just in the rear areas. This is the type of warfare we need to understand more thoroughly than we do today." Lansdale had been advocating since 1955 that the Civil Guard be trained for what would become known as counterinsurgency, but at the time, Diem feared coup attempts more than he did rural uprisings and had this force instructed in police tactics instead.<sup>21</sup>

Debate on the prospective Special Forces training mission continued for months. While courses began on Okinawa in March, it was not until the end of May that three teams finally deployed to Vietnam (*see May 30*), but only to work with ARVN troops, not the Civil Guard. In March, the

<sup>20.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:282 (1st-4th quotes), 287 (5th-6th quotes).

<sup>21.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:288–89 (quotes); Williams, USAF in Southeast Asia, 1:193; Spector, Advice and Support, 320–25.



In preparing the ARVN in conventional-force terms, General Williams and the MAAG had divided South Vietnam into tactical zone, which took into account geographical features but not pockets of insurgency. U.S. Army, Pacific, created this April 1961 map.

Army also developed the concept of what it called a Cold War Task Force for Vietnam, consisting of 156 Special Forces personnel and 19 other troops who specialized in civil affairs, intelligence, and psychological warfare. MAAG-Vietnam could not figure out how to fit 175 men within its limit of 685 billets, however, so the teams that finally deployed were much smaller.<sup>22</sup>

**February 21**: SSgt. Maurice W. Flournoy, USAF, who was serving in Laos out of uniform with the PEO as an advisor with the Lao air force, died in a nonmilitary-related drowning accident during a social outing. He is the first U.S. serviceman acknowledged to have died in Laos, and his name is listed third on the first panel of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, the first USAF airman named on the wall.<sup>23</sup>

**February 25**: General Williams put his views on the "Balance Between Security and Development in Newly Emerging Countries" in a memorandum for Ambassador Durbrow. Williams wrote that the Vietnamese farmer, "if secure from threat, would live as he has for thousands of years in the past, content with his lot on his rice paddy." He thought the country's population was "more responsive to fear and force than to an improved standard of living." Williams concluded that the "paramount consideration is to gain and maintain a superiority of force in all parts of the country. This is done by developing the military and police potential as the most urgent objective of our national program in Vietnam."<sup>24</sup>

Many of the contested areas as of 1960 had not been "secure from threat" for years, however. There had been extensive Viet Minh presence in several of these provinces for much of the war with the French, and communist cadres had remained after the 1954 peace agreement. The Diem government, often under the direction of the president's influential brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, had instituted a number of reforms, including the agroville program, that had relocated farmers and villagers (*see Jan. 4*). Since 1955, Diem and Nhu also had ordered several crackdowns that had rounded up thousands of supposed foes of the government, regardless of whether they had documented communist ties, including an extensive sweep that began in May 1959. Instead of improving security, these aggressive actions drove many in various rural areas to align with the Viet Cong or to seek its protection against governmental action.<sup>25</sup>

25. Spector, Advice and Support, 336; Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 70–74; Williams, USAF in Southeast Asia, 1:202, 207–8, 246.

<sup>22.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:332; FRUS 1961–63, 1:63. Durbrow noted in mid-April that the Vietnamese who the ARVN sent to Okinawa "are not receiving specialized guerrilla training but rather routine military training and have been sent to Okinawa rather than the states because it is cheaper to do it this way." FRUS 1958–60, 1:393.

<sup>23.</sup> *El Campo* [Texas] *Citizen*, March 8, 1960. Flournoy's death is not the first USAF fatality in Southeast Asia acknowledged on the Veterans Memorial, as the Defense Department in 1998 authorized the addition of TSgt. Richard B. Fitzgibbon Jr., who was killed by a fellow airman in 1955. Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:220.

<sup>24.</sup> Spector, Advice and Support, 335-36.
**February 29**: Sherman Kent, assistant director of intelligence for national estimates for the CIA, submitted his report on his recent trip to Vietnam. He found that the ARVN "was not being trained for the contingencies that United States estimates considered most likely, from terror raids to guerrilla war. Instead, ARVN was undergoing divisional and corps maneuvers and there were only 300 members of the special forces." Kent also noted that the MAAG showed little inclination to gather its own intelligence and instead relied on the ARVN (*see Jan. 7, Feb. 12, Mar. 10*). According to Ambassador Durbrow, General Williams often repeated that "we're not in the intelligence business." Durbrow thought the military attachés attached to the embassy had much better intelligence sources than the MAAG did.<sup>26</sup>

Williams resisted calls for modifications in ARVN training and organization. "He kept his old-type thinking going," Durbrow recalled. As Army historian Ronald H. Spector wrote, "Through at least the first half of 1960," Williams "continued to believe that there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the South Vietnamese Army that reform and elimination of favoritism could not cure" (*see June 1, Aug. 14*).<sup>27</sup>

**March–April**: Lansdale, promoted to brigadier general in April, played a central role in U.S. military discussion in Washington regarding counterinsurgency during this period (although the term "counterinsurgency" was not yet in use). Lansdale was one of the few U.S. officials with irregular warfare experience from his time in the Philippines and Vietnam in the 1940s and 1950s. In memos and at an interdepartmental conference, he stressed the importance of building "a sound political basis first," but he stated that accomplishing this mission would require "something *extra* and *special* by both Vietnam and the United States." Lansdale continued to believe that Diem was the best, if not the only, hope for stability and success and that the South Vietnamese president had to be dealt with sympathetically, in contrast to the direct and sometimes confrontational manner of Ambassador Durbrow (*see Apr. 7, Sept. 16, Oct. 14, Dec. 31*).<sup>28</sup>

On April 19, Diem had the South Vietnamese ambassador in Washington request that Lansdale be sent to Saigon "to discuss tactics for dealing with intensified communist guerrilla activity," according to a State

<sup>26.</sup> *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:293 (1st quote); Durbrow interview, 105–6 (2d quote). For the long-standing debate over whether the Army leadership of the MAAG was too focused on training for conventional operations, see Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:210–15, 218, 231–33.

<sup>27.</sup> Durbrow interview, 33 (1st quote); Spector, *Advice and Support*, 339 (2d–3d quotes); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 186. For Williams's defense of MAAG training methods as of February 29, see *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:291–93; for Durbrow's ongoing concern on this issue, see *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:396–404.

<sup>28.</sup> Spector, *Advisory Years*, 356–57 (quotes, emphasis in original); Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 236; *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:336–38, 386–87, 390–92, 410–11; Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:228.

Department cable. The debate on his possible deployment extended well into May, and although General Williams looked forward to Lansdale's input, the State Department did not ask that Lansdale be sent. Lansdale was unable to secure approval to visit Vietnam until the end of the year, and then only for a brief review mission (*see Nov. 17; Jan. 2–14, 1961*).<sup>29</sup>

Concurrently during the March-April time frame, the CIA station chief in Saigon, Nicholas A. Natsios, and some U.S. embassy personnel began discussing ways to divert Ngo Dinh Nhu from involvement in governmental affairs. They saw Nhu as a significant impediment to getting Diem to carry out needed reforms in the face of increasing communist activity. One idea they floated was Nhu's potential appointment as ambassador to the United States, a scenario Ambassador Durbrow also mentioned to the State Department. By April 21, however, Natsios had come to regard the concept of Nhu's removal as an "excellent but impractical" idea. CIA personnel switched course and approached Nhu and senior governmental officials to see if they could influence Diem to undertake more reforms. When William Colby succeeded Natsios in June, he more aggressively sought to cultivate Nhu as a conduit of U.S. policy, although CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, continued to regard Nhu as a "questionable instrument." Durbrow viewed him as a major obstacle and returned in the fall to the suggestion of an ambassadorship for him (see Sept. 16, Oct. 14).<sup>30</sup>

Also during this period, with national assembly elections in Laos approaching on April 24, the PEO in Vientiane requested that the USAF make aerial supply drops as it had done two years earlier in Operation Booster Shot in March–April 1958. These deliveries were supposed to bolster support for anticommunist candidates in contested regions. The idea sparked controversy, as State Department officials thought Booster Shot had been a CIA-sponsored failure. Det 2, 1045th OET (*see Jan. 1960*), already had started implementing an aggressive aid program, largely built around flying U–10 Helio Couriers to dirt landing strips in isolated areas, later known as Lima sites. Through March and April, pilots from Air America

29. *FRUS 1958–60* 1:394, 409, 425–26, 442–43, 457–60, 462–66. As Williams wrote Lansdale, disguising his reference to the U.S. embassy, "Locally you are considered a bad fellow because of your prior close association with Diem!" Ibid., 443. Lansdale reported to Williams on June 21 that the matter of his potential deployment was still under discussion. Thomas S. Gates Jr., the secretary of defense, had told Vice President Richard M. Nixon about the State Department's stonewalling, and Nixon "got angry when he heard about the way State played it," according to Lansdale. Ibid., 501. Nothing seems to have come of Nixon's involvement, but at the end of July, Durbrow reported a rumor he had heard that Lansdale might succeed him as ambassador. Ibid., 525. See also Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 187.

30. Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 134–36 (quotes); *FRUS 1958–60* 1:297–98, 603; Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 36. General Williams privately referred to Natsios as a "CIA henchman" and later said he was "more properly suited to be a cigar counter operator in a middle class hotel." Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 186.



The U–10 Helio Courier became the primary aircraft for flying aid to isolated outposts in Laos. Maj. Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt and his USAF detachment detailed to the CIA (out of uniform) flew these missions, as did civilian Air America pilots. USAF.

flew these sorties. The detachment's commander, Maj. Heinie Aderholt, trained Air America pilots in U–10s and coordinated the missions.<sup>31</sup>

The USAF had more direct involvement around the time of the canvass. C–130s carried two bulldozers and two trucks to Udorn, Thailand, on April 20, then successfully airdropped the trucks and one of the bulldozers at Phong Saly, in the heart of Pathet Lao territory, on the 26th. Some of the cargo parachutes did not deploy during the attempt to deliver the second bulldozer on the 29th, however, resulting in loss of the equipment.<sup>32</sup>

31. William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954–1961* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 161; Trest, *Air Commando One*, 104–6; Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, 25–26. For Operation Booster Shot, see Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:238–41. The Laotian military also engaged in a pre-election sweep in 1960, Operation Clean Up, marching 5,000 troops into contested areas. Brig. Gen. John A. Heintges, the PEO commander, supported this move, but U.S. embassy officials were quite skeptical of it. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 161–62.

32. Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, 26; Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton, *The War in Northern Laos*, 1954–1973 (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 26–27 (all references are to the redacted, declassified version: https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB248/war\_in\_northern\_laos.pdf); Ray L. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 440, https://media.defense.gov/2010/Oct/13/2001329761/-1/-1/0/AFD-101013-035.pdf.

As the April 24 vote revealed, the government did not need the support of U.S. civil action, as government-favored anticommunist candidates won every national assembly seat in a blatantly tainted election. The Pathet Lao's allies in Hanoi took notice and began planning more subversive activities.<sup>33</sup>

**March 2**: Ambassador Durbrow expressed concern to the State Department that the people surrounding Diem were not giving him accurate reports on the fluid situation in his country. "Government officials have failed to speak frankly" with Diem "about the internal security and the basic grumbling of the people," Durbrow wrote. Instead, they were telling him "what they thought he wanted to hear." The lack of accurate intelligence remained a problem for the ARVN, and for the MAAG as well (*see Feb. 29, Mar. 10*).<sup>34</sup>

March 9: In a meeting with Ambassador Durbrow, Diem "outlined extra equipment he needs soonest to meet [the] growing internal security problem, which he labeled 'war." His lead request was for aircraft: more C-47s to increase paradrop capabilities, L-19s for observation and liaison, helicopters for observation and evacuation, and AD-4s to replace the nearly obsolete F–8Fs the VNAF fighter squadron was flying. Diem also wanted new amphibious vehicles to replace the worn-out ones the ARVN had inherited from the French, communications equipment, automatic weapons, and 60mm mortars. Durbrow told him that since Congress had cut Military Assistance Program (MAP) funds by a considerable amount, he doubted that it would be possible to obtain additional equipment, or to outfit the new commando companies Diem had ordered (see Feb. 15). In response, "Diem reiterated [that the] Viet Cong had opened [an] allout guerrilla war which would last [a] long time and therefore it [was] essential [to] receive additional MAP equipment for [the] long haul." Durbrow added in his communication with the State Department that he had checked with General Williams, from whom he had learned that the South Vietnamese government had not requested any of this equipment through formal MAAG channels.<sup>35</sup>

33. Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 154; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 26–27; Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 161–64; Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict*, 1954–1963 (Washington, DC, and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2003), 137–38.

34. Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 35.

35. *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:325. On March 21, Diem spelled out that he wanted twenty-five C–47s, twelve H–34 helicopters, and enough L–19s to form two additional squadrons, which could have meant as many as fifty of those planes. Durbrow told him at that time that of these aircraft, the only ones with any chance of delivery would be the helicopters. Ibid., 350-51.



The United States began loaning Grumman F–8F Bearcats to the French in Vietnam in 1951. These aircraft transitioned to the VNAF as the French withdrew from Indochina and served as the primary fighter for the VNAF until the United States replaced them with AD–6s in 1960–61. The plane shown was on display after being taken out of service, along with the array of ordnance the aircraft could carry. *USAF*.

The U.S. military had programmed delivery of six AD-4s for December 1960 to begin replacing the F-8F fleet, with fourteen more to follow in 1961. In discussions after Diem asked for aircraft, the USN determined that it could not furnish enough supplies to maintain AD-4s, so it suggested the variant AD-6 instead. An internal Defense Department memorandum indicated that substitution of AD-6s for AD-4s would "expedite delivery by approximately 12 months." Some at USAF headquarters in Washington favored T-28s, but the Pentagon ultimately decided on AD-6s, which Williams described as "a good plane for the job at hand." With all that had to be done to prepare for deployment of a new airframe, including pilot training, the earliest the U.S. military determined it could send the first installment of six AD-6s was September (see Sept. 23), which the Defense Department informed the South Vietnamese government in April (see Apr. 5-6). Although the State Department did look into ways to fund additional C-47s and L-19s, Admiral Felt recommended against providing them until the VNAF improved utilization rates (see Apr. 18). The United States provided no other aircraft at this time, other than H-34 helicopters sent at the end of the year (see Dec. 1).<sup>36</sup>

36. *FRUS 1958–60* 1:331–32, 351, 359 (1st quote), 389, 422; Williams interview, 40 (2d quote); Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1981), 54–55 (hereafter *Advisory Years*), https://media. defense.gov/2010/May/25/2001330284/-1/-1/0/AFD-100525-052.pdf. As of March 18, the Pentagon was hoping to be able to provide "about ten to a dozen" AD–6s in September and the rest to fill out a squadron in August 1961, but the memorandum also noted that there was very little money left in the contingency fund for the fiscal year. *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:342n.

Meanwhile, the Defense Department sent a civilian inspector to determine the condition of the F–8Fs. Even though the VNAF knew he was coming, Williams said the inspector found that the planes "were filthy, uncared for, with spilled oil in the cockpits, maintenance shops in filthy condition, and so forth." Williams never saw the report, but he and his MAAG colleagues suspected that the inspector recommended that the VNAF receive no updated aircraft until the service showed that it could better maintain the ones it had. Williams blamed USAF advisors with the VNAF fighter squadron and their supervisors with the Air Force section of the MAAG for the poor showing during the inspection.<sup>37</sup>

Williams also was not convinced that the VNAF was using the aircraft it already had to the fullest. He wrote on March 10 that "use of available L–19s in continuous support of anti-guerrilla operations remains [a] matter of continuous persuasion" (*see Sept. 23*).<sup>38</sup>

Durbrow later stated that "you didn't need very modern [air] platforms to operate there." The Geneva accords prohibited the introduction of jet aircraft, but Durbrow thought the propeller-driven planes that the United States made available were a better fit for the "small landing fields" and supply drops. "I didn't think the way the situation was, and the terrain they had to operate in, the airports available, that you needed anything very sophisticated in support of the ARVN," he said, particularly in counter-guerrilla operations. With roads "almost nonexistent" in the areas of engagement, "mobility and lift and resupply" were the most important aerial needs.<sup>39</sup>

**March 10**: As discussion of the situation in Vietnam increased in Washington (*see Mar.–Apr.*), Colonel Lansdale telegraphed General Williams, with whom he had worked in Vietnam in 1955–56, for an unvarnished update. Williams replied on this date that "I'm not pessimistic," but "unquestionably, the situation is delicate." The MAAG commander wondered whether the South Vietnamese government had "tried to do too much too rapidly since it appears civilian disaffection is growing or at least too many in the rural areas seem to be fence sitting. VC as you know cannot exist without some element of [the] civilian population being sympathetic or at least indifferent" (*see Jan. 4*).<sup>40</sup>

Williams estimated total insurgent strength at 3,000 to 5,000 troops. "Attacks vary with no set pattern," he wrote, from small engagements to the largest one in Tay Ninh Province (*see Jan. 26*). The ARVN had

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<sup>37.</sup> Williams interview, 41-42.

<sup>38.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:323.

<sup>39.</sup> Durbrow interview, 70–72. 40. *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:324.

responded with what Williams called a "disorganized commitment," a convoluted chain of command where ARVN troops in each district came under "control and direction" of the province chiefs, who reported directly to Diem. Higher-level military commanders played no role. "Thus [the] mission of defeating [the] small but growing guerrilla opposition has not been entrusted to general staff control," Williams noted, "as frankly, Diem appears often to hold them in contempt."<sup>41</sup>

Williams also lamented Diem's plan to form commando companies (*see Feb. 15*), observing that the "concept for their employment [is] still not clearly defined." As for the existing paramilitary corps, the Civil Guard, Williams considered it "ill-trained and organized" and "particularly ineffective" (*see Jan. 27*).<sup>42</sup>

The MAAG commander reported that "information most important to anti-VC operations" was "often delayed to military units." He noted the "political control of all critical intelligence, and the primary intelligence systems," which he described as a "major continuing problem." Williams thought that development of a "sound military intelligence system to include an active planned collection and dissemination effort tied with nonmilitary intelligence systems is essential."<sup>43</sup>

**March 17**: U.S. Secretary of State Christian A. Herter issued guidance on MAAG expansion to absorb TERM billets as the TERM program expired (*see Jan. 7, May 5*). He indicated that the State Department had received "favorable and sympathetic" responses to the concept from ICC members India and Canada, as well the United Kingdom, which was a co-chair administering the Geneva settlement. Herter advised that the State Department "suggest" to the South Vietnamese government that it "submit [a] short, quiet note to [the] ICC on March 31 to [the] effect [that] MAAG increases will start [on] April 15 and MAAG will be gradually increased to 685 by [the] end [of] 1960." The Defense Department had indicated on March 11 that as of April 1, no U.S. personnel newly arriving in Vietnam would be assigned to TERM, and transfers from TERM to MAAG should proceed on a monthly basis, with TERM to be dissolved at the end of the year. The USAF had 102 billets of the combined MAAG-TERM total of 685.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41.</sup> Ibid., 1:321. These command and control issues became a central point of discussion during a meeting about Vietnam at the Pentagon on March 18 that included Lansdale. Ibid., 336–37, 339. Diem reiterated the estimate of 3,000 to 5,000 insurgents during a meeting with Williams on April 6. Ibid., 371.

<sup>42.</sup> Ibid., 1:321.

<sup>43.</sup> Ibid., 1:322.

<sup>44.</sup> Ibid., 1:334–35 (quotes); History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960–31 December 1960, AFHRA, Iris no. 00471206, p. 80.



Secretary of State Christian A. Herter took much less interest in Southeast Asia than had his predecessor, John Foster Dulles, who died in 1959. Herter did get involved in March 1960 to provide guidance on how the troops of the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission, which had been effectively doubling the MAAG billets since 1956, could be absorbed into the MAAG, with minimal international protest. *National Archives*.

**March 25**: General Williams cabled Colonel Lansdale an update from Saigon. The MAAG commander reported that he thought there was "little chance" to get Diem to rescind his directive to form ARVN commando units (*see Feb. 15*) because he would "lose face," but Williams believed there was a "good chance of getting it modified." As of that date, the ARVN had assembled no new ranger companies.<sup>45</sup>

Williams reported that when he had gone out recently to observe an operation with Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, the ARVN chief of staff, Khanh complained about provincial officials (*see Jan. 4, Feb. 12*) and stated that "local administrators make ten Viet Cong behind my back faster than I can kill one in my front." Williams added that "you know better than I there are not enough troops in Vietnam to whip the Viet Cong unless civilian administrators do their own job correctly."<sup>46</sup>

**April**: Insurgent attacks intensified during the month, particularly in provinces south of Saigon. More agrovilles came under assault, and 224 government officials fell to assassination, the most in one month up to that time. South Vietnamese intelligence estimated that 3,000 irregular troops

45. FRUS 1958–60, 1:348–49. 46. Ibid., 1:349.

had augmented the suspected 3,000 to 5,000 Viet Cong regulars. The Vietnamese official history of the conflict later claimed more than 10,000 irregulars in the area south of Saigon alone. The ARVN had sent nearly 10,000 men into the Ben Tre Province region on March 25, where in many places they countered the insurgents with brutal repression. Locals drove these government troops out of several villages.<sup>47</sup>

In the same month, Admiral Felt commissioned a staff study on counter-guerrilla activities, which became a document titled "Counter-Insurgency Operations in South Vietnam and Laos." Felt forwarded the resulting document to the Joint Chiefs, who added their recommendations. After coordination between the Defense and State Departments on various issues, the findings ultimately reached the MAAG and Ambassador Durbrow, who continued the process that eventually resulted in a counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam in early 1961 (*see June 30; Jan. 4, Feb. 13, 1961*).<sup>48</sup>

**April 5–6**: Nguyen Dinh Thuan, South Vietnamese secretary of state and basically the number-two man in Diem's government, visited Washington in early April. On these dates, he met with senior civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon, including Thomas S. Gates Jr., the secretary of defense. Thuan emphasized the same theme that Diem had been stressing: that infiltration of personnel and supplies from North Vietnam was driving increased insurgent activity, not indigenous discontent (*see Feb. 12*).<sup>49</sup>

Thuan reiterated the requests for aircraft and equipment that Diem had initiated a month earlier (*see Mar. 9*). The April talks included specific numbers: ten C–47s, fifteen L–19s, and six H–34s or H–19s (*see Dec. 1*). At the State Department on April 4, Thuan had asked about C–123s to provide greater airlift capability than the VNAF's antiquated C–47s, but there was no recorded mention of C–123s at the Pentagon. Thuan did request expedited delivery of AD–4s to replace the F–8F fighters, although with no number of them noted. Defense Department officials replied that they would be sending AD–6s instead of AD–4s (*see Mar. 9*). They would have six ready by September (*see Sept. 23*), accelerating the time line from the previous commitment to deliver AD–4s in December. Beyond those aircraft, which the U.S. military already had scheduled as replacements, the Pentagon promised no other planes or equipment, or additional funding for them.<sup>50</sup>

47. Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 50; FRUS 1958-60, 1:406-8; Victory in Vietnam, 63-64.

48. CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:169–70, https://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/c\_ sixtyone.pdf; *FRUS* 1958–60, 1:489–92. According to *FRUS*, there were drafts of the initial study dated April 24 and April 26. The CINCPAC study is one of the first known documents to use the term "counter-insurgency."

49. FRUS 1958-60, 1:388.

50. Ibid., 1:366, 388. The Vietnamese had backed off of the aggressive request that Diem had made to Ambassador Durbrow on March 21: twenty-five C–47s, twelve H–34 helicopters, and enough L–19s to form two additional squadrons. Ibid., 350-51.



Nguyen Dinh Thuan, South Vietnamese secretary of state for the presidency and assistant secretary of state for national defense, meeting with President John F. Kennedy in September 1962. Thuan was the senior administrator and essentially the number-two man within Diem's government, although Ngo Dinh Nhu, the president's brother, held more sway as head of the Can Lao Party. *Kennedy Library.* 

At one of the meetings, Col. William K. McNown, USAF, representing the Department of the Air Force, "stressed the importance of maximum utilization of aircraft on hand." He said the Vietnamese should "guard against obtaining more equipment than they have the capability to maintain" (*see Mar. 9, Sept. 23*).<sup>51</sup>

Also while at the State Department on April 4, Thuan had asked about funding for a jet-capable runway at Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon (*see Jan. 7*), ostensibly for nonmilitary use, as he mentioned that the South Vietnamese government was working with Pan American World Airways to build a hotel near the airport.<sup>52</sup>

**April 7**: Ambassador Durbrow met with Diem and told him there was "considerable difficulty convincing Washington" to expand the military aid budget to cover Diem's recent requests, including aircraft (*see Mar. 9*). Durbrow noted in particular the U.S. government's concern over "disturbing reports" about "alleged corrupt practices [by the] Can Lao party." State Department officials in Washington delivered a message to Thuan on the same day about congressional concern with corruption.

51. Ibid., 1:390. 52. Ibid., 1:367, 384.

According to Durbrow, Diem insisted throughout their conversation that the reports were "unfounded." Durbrow listed many abuses, including political favoritism in military promotions, an issue that even General Williams, who went out of his way not to offend Diem, would eventually address at the end of his tour (*see Aug. 14*). Can Lao influence was pervasive in the government as well, as Diem and Nhu had replaced most senior officials with loyal functionaries. Some saw this meeting as another example of Durbrow being too confrontational with Diem, although South Vietnamese intellectuals would cite many of the same issues in their public critique three weeks later (*see Apr. 26*).<sup>53</sup>

**April 8**: Gen. Charles P. Cabell, USAF, the CIA deputy director, hosted a luncheon and meeting for Thuan with senior CIA and military officers. Thuan said that insurgent activity was not as widespread as reported and was centered mainly in three provinces: Ben Tre, An Xuyen, and Tay Ninh (*see Jan. 17, 26*). The situation in southern Laos was "completely rotten," however, and communists were in control of much of the border region, allowing unfettered North Vietnamese infiltration. Thuan said the most important objective of the South Vietnamese government was to "win over and retain the confidence and loyalty of the population" as a check against the insurgents. For this reason, Diem attached "primary importance" to the agroville program (*see Jan. 4, Feb. 12, Aug.*).<sup>54</sup>

During discussion of hardware needs, Adm. Arleigh A. Burke, the chief of naval operations, told Thuan that he had "informed his subordinates that delivery of AD–6 planes in August 1960 was not fast enough" (*see Apr. 5–6, Sept. 23*).<sup>55</sup>

In a meeting at the State Department on the same day, officials there told Thuan that South Vietnam should expect continued cuts in aid, both economic and military. Indeed, Sen. Michael J. "Mike" Mansfield (D-Mont.), the leading expert in Congress on Southeast Asia and a long-time Diem supporter, had recently indicated that there should be an eventual cessation of grant money for Vietnam. C. Douglas Dillon, the undersecretary of state, noted that they were not talking about suddenly cutting off funding, but he pointed out that Taiwan had a military twice as large as South Vietnam's, yet it required half as much U.S. aid to support and maintain it.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53.</sup> Ibid., 1:375–77, 385 (1st–2d quotes, 375; 3d quote, 376); Spector, *Advice and Support*, 346–47; Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 45–47; Miller, *Misalliance*, 206. Although Durbrow pressed Diem hard on corruption issues—some said too hard—the ambassador later commented in a 1970 interview that "there was very little corruption whatsoever" during Diem's tenure. Durbrow interview, 48.

<sup>54.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:383.

<sup>55.</sup> Ibid., 384.

<sup>56.</sup> Ibid., 1:380–83. For Mansfield's long-standing influence on Vietnam policy, see Williams, USAF in Southeast Asia, 1:180–81, 185, 199, 213.

**April 18**: Admiral Felt recommended against furnishing the additional aircraft Diem had requested, other than the already-programmed fighter replacements (*see Mar. 9, Apr. 5–6*), and stressed that the South Vietnamese should be "taking action to improve [the] utilization [of] resources [already] on hand."<sup>57</sup>

On the same date, Ambassador Durbrow wrote the State Department that Diem "still appears attached to a 'divide and rule' policy of not allowing individual generals, or administrative officials, to obtain positions of centralized power, but he has been showing signs of changing his ideas on this subject." The ambassador observed that "the lack of security has reached a point where he may reluctantly decide to relax his grip somewhat and delegate adequate authority to the military on the one hand and the civilian administration on the other" (*see Apr. 1961*).<sup>58</sup>

**April 19**: Citing increased insurgent activity (*see Apr.*), Ambassador Durbrow cabled the State Department with the request that it renew conversation with the Defense Department in an effort to get approval for U.S. Special Forces to train the Civil Guard in counter-guerrilla tactics (*see Jan. 27, Feb. 15, May 30, Aug. 20, Oct. 14, Nov. 27*).<sup>59</sup>

**April 20**: Le Duan, a more radical member of the North Vietnamese leadership who was rising rapidly in the Communist Party (*see Sept.*), gave a speech in commemoration of Lenin's ninetieth birthday in which he tried to walk the fine line between reassuring moderate colleagues while also encouraging southern revolutionaries. He spoke of the need to "guide and restrict within the South the solving of the contradiction between imperialism and the colonies in our country" while also noting that the South Vietnamese people "must not sit passively and wait for others; they must rise up and liberate themselves." Le Duan explained to those worried that their southern comrades were moving too hastily toward widespread conflict (*see Jan. 17*) that because "the imperialists resorted to violence for their domination, our people had no other road than to carry out an armed insurrection and utilize revolutionary force."<sup>60</sup>

**April 21**: The State Department presented President Dwight D. Eisenhower with a short memorandum on the situation in Vietnam that it had prepared at his request. The document stated that "a marked intensification of

<sup>57.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:436.

<sup>58.</sup> Ibid., 1:393-94.

<sup>59.</sup> Ibid., 1:406-7.

<sup>60.</sup> Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 90, 436 n. 6 (1st quote); Thies, *When Governments Collide*, 239 (2d–3d quotes). For the debate within the North Vietnamese leadership during the spring and summer, see Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 75–78.

subversive activities directed by the Communist regime in Hanoi" had been the "major recent development" (*see Apr.*). The State Department posited that the more aggressive tactics were a "reaction to the progress being achieved" by Diem's government. The paper noted that plans being formulated in response to the insurgent operations "may call for increased U.S. assistance in counter-guerrilla training and for certain specialized U.S. equipment to combat the particular tactics which the Communists have now adopted."<sup>61</sup>

**April 26**: A group of eighteen South Vietnamese intellectuals issued what became known as the Caravelle Manifesto, named for the Saigon hotel at which it was signed. Several of the signatories had once held cabinet-level or other senior positions in Diem's government, while others had been part of the leadership of the politico-religious organizations known as the sects, which had attempted to overthrow Diem in 1955. The document offered a wide-ranging indictment of the Diem-led government, citing many examples of corruption and repression. According to historian Edward Miller, "Diem, predictably, rejected the allegations and ignored the specific reform proposals presented in the manifesto. But many of the letter's complaints resonated with ARVN officers—especially its denunciation of the regime's use of the Can Lao to sow divisions in the army." The U.S. embassy received an advance copy of the paper two weeks before its release but chose not to alert Diem.<sup>62</sup>

**April 29**: In a document titled "Operations Plan for Vietnam," which included sections from the State and Defense Departments and the CIA, the CIA concluded that "the Viet Cong do not present a major military threat to the Diem government at this time."<sup>63</sup>

**May**: North Vietnamese and Chinese leaders met in both Hanoi and Beijing, with Premier Zhou Enlai leading the delegation to Vietnam. China was more open than it had been in previous discussions to a move toward armed conflict in South Vietnam, but it urged a deliberate approach, not rapid escalation. The Chinese military refused to provide weaponry for the southern insurgents. The Soviets also did not encourage expanded aggression. As historian Pierre Asselin put it, "At a time when the two socialist giants seemed incapable of agreeing on anything, they basically shared the same reservations about Vietnamese communist strategy below

<sup>61.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:407-8.

<sup>62.</sup> Miller, Misalliance, 206 (quote); Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 50–53; Anderson, Trapped by Success, 183–85; FRUS 1958–60, 1:404–6, 438.

<sup>63.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:424.

the seventeenth parallel." Asselin noted that the Chinese and Russian attitudes "perturbed Hanoi." Zhou also visited Cambodian leaders in Phnom Penh during April, much to U.S. concern (*see June 5*).<sup>64</sup>

**May 1**: The Soviets shot down a U–2C reconnaissance aircraft over the Soviet Union, sparking a major international incident and increasing Cold War tensions. The pilot was Francis Gary Powers, a former USAF officer who was flying as a civilian for the CIA. The U–2 incident derailed a mid-May summit in Paris of leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and France. Moderates in the Hanoi government had hoped that this conference could ease tensions and renew promise for peaceful reunification in Vietnam, but its collapse emboldened the communist militants, particularly those in the south.<sup>65</sup>

**May 5**: In the midst of the U–2 crisis (*see May 1*)—in fact, on the same day Sen. Mike Mansfield, the Senate majority whip and a powerful member of the Foreign Relations Committee, was questioning the Eisenhower administration's handling of the incident—United Press International (UPI) reported that the United States was "doubling its military training staff in South Vietnam and stepping up the training of Vietnamese troops for guerrilla warfare against Communist terrorists." The report indicated that "guerrilla warfare specialists will be included among about 350 additional American military training officers and men sent to Vietnam."<sup>66</sup>

The State Department and the MAAG quietly had been trying to manage the absorption of billets of the expiring TERM program into the MAAG (*see Jan. 7, Mar. 17*), but the UPI story created very public problems. Mansfield immediately wrote Secretary of State Herter and General Williams on May 5 wanting to know "what changes have occurred in the Vietnamese situation which require the addition of 350 men to the MAAG mission." Mansfield asked whether Williams had initiated the call for more troops and if he had the concurrence of Ambassador Durbrow.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64.</sup> Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 1950–1975 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 83; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 79 (quotes); *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:434.

<sup>65.</sup> Gregory W. Pedlow and Donald E. Welzenbach, *The CIA and the U-2 Program*, 1954–1974 (Langley, VA: CIA, 1998), 174–87, 332, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/the-cia-and-the-u-2-program-1954-1974/ u2.pdf; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 76–77.

<sup>66.</sup> United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 10:1278 (hereafter U.S.-Vietnam Relations) (For the full collection of what came to be called the Pentagon Papers, which do not align with the pagination in the edition cited, see https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers). Mansfield chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's subcommittee on State Department Organization and Public Affairs. Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 67.

<sup>67.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 10:1276 (quote); FRUS 1958-60, 1:441-42.

By way of the Defense Department, Williams cabled Mansfield that the new arrangement was simply ending the "subterfuge" that had been in place since 1956 of TERM doubling the MAAG slots. Instead of the U.S. presence growing, Williams stated his "personal opinion" that the MAAG "should and can work itself 'out of [a] job," with a "possible reduction" of 15 percent in June 1961 and 20 percent in each following year.<sup>68</sup>

Herter informed Mansfield that the ICC had ruled in April that the TERM-to-MAAG transfer would not violate the Geneva accords. North Vietnam disagreed, however. In response to MAAG expansion, it sent senior leaders to Moscow in May and June to lobby the Soviets, as cochairs with the British of the conference that had reached the Geneva agreement in 1954, to seek modification of the accords to give the ICC more authority to impose firmer limits on South Vietnam and its allies.<sup>69</sup>

**May 9**: A CIA representative presented a briefing on the situation in Vietnam for the National Security Council (NSC). He reported that Diem was "facing increased insurgent activity in the countryside similar to that which characterized the last days of the French regime." He added that "Diem's own ranks" were "crumbling" as "critics of his one-man rule were becoming more vocal at all levels of government." President Eisenhower indicated that he had "received a stream of reports about South Vietnam." He was concerned that Diem was "becoming arbitrary and blind to the situation." Nevertheless, Eisenhower said that the United States "ought to do everything possible to prevent the deterioration of the situation in South Vietnam," as it would be "bad to lose it at this stage."<sup>70</sup>

Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates observed that South Vietnamese internal security forces "were not well equipped to handle insurgent forces in the swampy areas where most of the trouble occurred." The senior State Department representative at the meeting said more nonmilitary aid would not help, as State thought South Vietnam was already "getting as much economic assistance as it could effectively absorb." Eisenhower told the Defense and State Departments to consult and see what they could recommend to improve the situation.<sup>71</sup>

Also on May 9, Secretary Herter informed Ambassador Durbrow that other than the AD–6s already programmed, the only aircraft for South Vietnam with any potential to be funded in the near term were six H–34s

<sup>68.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:441–42 (quotes); U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 10:1277–78. For Williams's more extensive reply in the form of a letter, see FRUS 1958–60, 1:467–71.

<sup>69.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:442; Gaiduk, Confronting Vietnam, 112-13.

<sup>70.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:446–47.

<sup>71.</sup> Ibid., 1:447.



Sen. Michael J. "Mike" Mansfield (D-Mont.), Senate majority whip and member of the Foreign Relations Committee, had taught Asian history before entering Congress, and many in Washington considered him an expert on the Far East. Mansfield had known Diem since before he became prime minister in 1954 and took a personal interest in matters related to Vietnam. Despite his close following of events there, he was unaware of State and Defense Department plans to expand the MAAG by absorbing billets of personnel ostensibly working on equipment recovery. *Johnson Library*.

(*see Mar. 9, Apr. 5–6*). Debate about providing these helicopters continued until their delivery at the end of the year (*see Sept. 1, 6, Dec. 1*).<sup>72</sup>

On the same date, Durbrow cabled Washington that Diem remained "blindly convinced that [his] government [is] gaining [the] upper hand over [the] Viet Cong."<sup>73</sup>

**May 24**: Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong and fifteen other communist party officials escaped from Laotian government confinement. CIA director Allen W. Dulles posited that the prison break "would probably be the signal for increased anti-government activity by the communists and their sympathizers." It took the prince and his party several months by foot to reach a Pathet Lao encampment near the border of North Vietnam.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72.</sup> Ibid., 1:448, 500.

<sup>73.</sup> Ibid., 1:450.

<sup>74.</sup> Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 164 (quote); Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 154–55; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 27.



Prince Norodom Sihanouk with President Kennedy in 1961. Sihanouk led Cambodia under various titles throughout the 1960s and confounded the West with his neutralist stance that often leaned toward communist powers China and the Soviet Union. *Kennedy Library.* 

May 30: After months of debate on whether and how they should be deployed (see Jan. 27, Feb. 15, Apr. 19), U.S. Army Special Forces began arriving in South Vietnam, serving under the MAAG within the billet limit of 685 men. Initial requests had been for them to train Civil Guard troops in counter-guerrilla tactics, but by the time they were sent, their mission was with ARVN regulars. The Army deployed forty-six men as part of the first training contingent. Although the Special Forces had requested a seven-week schedule, General Williams restricted the course to four weeks. The poor quality of the ARVN troops became evident immediately, as only 218 of 311 enrolled completed the first course. Williams thought the high failure rate was due to the perception among the trainees that they would be released from military service if they washed out, while Diem attributed it to what he said was softness of natives of the central region of Vietnam. The plan was for ARVN trainees to become instructors, but the low quality of the men sent to be trained led to an extension of the Special Forces mission. Nevertheless, by August, the military reduced the number of Special Forces in Vietnam to ten men, although Ambassador

Durbrow lobbied at the end of the month to get it raised to fifty. The military withdrew the last Special Forces team in November, with ARVN trainers taking over the instruction.<sup>75</sup>

The question of counterinsurgency training for the Civil Guard remained problematic. Since the Civil Guard was under the South Vietnamese interior ministry, not the defense ministry, the MAAG had played no role with it (*see Jan. 27*). The U.S. Joint Chiefs refused to allow uniformed U.S. personnel to work with Civil Guard forces under the auspices of the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM), which oversaw all nonmilitary aid matters in Vietnam. Debate on how to overcome this bureaucratic impasse continued through the fall (*see Sept. 1, 6, 13, Nov. 27*).<sup>76</sup>

**June 1**: Despite increasing insurgent activities, General Williams presented Ambassador Durbrow with a detailed statement of why the ARVN still needed to be organized and trained as a conventional force. In a confidential note to a friend in the State Department, Durbrow wrote that Williams's "explanation' went all over the lot and landed nowhere and added up to a rather weak explanation as to why they had not done more in the antiguerrilla training field."<sup>77</sup>

Durbrow later recalled that "some of my biggest fights with Williams [were] trying to get him away from this column of squads thing, and get more mobile land forces and equipment . . . and operate in a more flexible manner." Durbrow said it was "partially my fault" that he did not do more, in an earlier time frame, to have the ARVN trained more for "the counterinsurgency type of operation."<sup>78</sup>

**June 5**: In the culmination of his carefully staged succession plan after his father's death on April 3, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the former king and prime minister of Cambodia, won election as head of state with 99.98 percent of the vote. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai had visited Phnom Penh in April, and on July 2, just after Sihanouk formally assumed power, the prince declared that if the United States did not "radically revise" its military aid policy, he would ask the Soviet Bloc for aircraft and arms. By August, however, Sihanouk was promoting improved interaction with

<sup>75.</sup> Spector, *Advice and Support*, 354–55; Robert F. Futrell, "Chronology of Significant Airpower Events in Southeast Asia, 1954–1967," Corona Harvest report, December 15, 1967, AFHRA, Iris no. 01006908, p. 5 (hereafter Futrell Chron.); Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 75; *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:545–46; *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:62–63.

<sup>76.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:489-94, 498 n. 1, 502-9.

<sup>77.</sup> Ibid., 1:471–83, 524 (quote).

<sup>78.</sup> Durbrow interview, 94–95. Williams, meanwhile, insisted long after his retirement that if the United States had followed his training recommendations, the war would have turned out differently. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 186.

the West and planning a trip to the United States in September that lasted almost two months (*see Sept.* 27).<sup>79</sup>

U.S. interests in Cambodia had been complicated in the spring by South Vietnamese aid to groups opposing Sihanouk and his government, directed by Ngo Dinh Nhu and authorized by Diem. Ambassador Durbrow's desire to threaten to withhold aid to South Vietnam over this issue sparked controversy within the State and Defense Departments.<sup>80</sup>

South Vietnam and the United States needed Cambodian cooperation to help with North Vietnamese infiltration. Durbrow remembered discussing the situation with Sihanouk in the spring of 1960. "What can I do?" Durbrow recalled Sihanouk saying. "I have a small army of 25,000 to 30,000 men. It's very swampy land out there; it's hard to get to. I know they're there. I am not going to admit it [to the international community], and if you say anything about it, I am going to deny I said this, but I know they're there. I can't do anything about it."<sup>81</sup>

**June 11**: Ambassador Durbrow reported to the State Department that over recent days, Vietnamese and French officials in Saigon had questioned him and other embassy personnel about whether the United States was changing its policy toward South Vietnam, and if it was looking to see if Diem could be replaced. The U.S. State Department issued an internal document on June 15 to clarify its stance on support for South Vietnam.<sup>82</sup>

**June 24**: In a discussion of the necessity for counterinsurgency training for the Civil Guard (*see May 30*), Diem stated that this force needed to be able to "relieve" the ARVN in confronting the "internal security problem" so the ARVN could regroup and train for its "primary function," which he saw as "defense of the country against external aggression."<sup>83</sup>

**June 30**: Admiral Felt forwarded to Secretary of Defense Gates the draft counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam (*see Apr.*), updated with input from the Joint Chiefs, for coordination with the State Department and transmittal to the MAAG and the U.S. embassy "for study, comment, and

<sup>79.</sup> Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 364–69; Futrell Chron., 5 (quote); U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Visits by Foreign Leaders: Cambodia," http://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/visits/cambodia.

<sup>80.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:433-37, 448-49; Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 60-63.

<sup>81.</sup> Durbrow interview, 69.

<sup>82.</sup> *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:495–500. For details of various intrigues against Diem during the spring and summer of 1960, for which Frankhum places significant blame on Durbrow and the State Department, see Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 69–81.

<sup>83.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:505.

further development." The Vietnam country team took the rest of the year developing the plan (*see Jan. 4, 1961*).<sup>84</sup>

**July 25**: President Eisenhower approved NSC 6012, "U.S. Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia," a revision of NSC 5809 from April 1958. "The national security of the United States would be endangered by Communist domination" of the area, according to the document, "whether achieved by overt aggression, subversion, or a political and economic offensive." The NSC staff saw the overarching threat as externally driven and observed that the United States was "likely to remain the only major outside source of power to counteract the Russian-Chinese thrust into Southeast Asia." Despite significant developments in South Vietnam in the first half of 1960, NSC 6012 updated very little specific to that country from NSC 5809. The only new recommendations were that the United States should do more to encourage and assist South Vietnamese public information programs and "encourage and support an improvement in relations between Vietnam and Cambodia" (*see June 5*).<sup>85</sup>

84. Ibid., 1:512-14 (quote, 514).

85. U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 10:1281–97 (1st–2d quotes, 1282; 3d quote, 1283; 4th quote, 1295). Marginalia on pp. 1294–95 shows the few changes from NSC 5809. The NSC issued a slightly revised version of NSC 6012 on August 24, 1960.



# Two

# Civil War in Laos, Instability in Vietnam August–December 1960

Before the latter third of 1960, the United States paid little attention to Laos, the lightly populated, land-locked, jungle-ensnared country at the heart of Southeast Asia. With the communist Pathet Lao involved in the complicated three-party civil war that broke out in the fall, however, the Cold War found the Land of a Million Elephants. Soviet and North Vietnamese aid to the Pathet Lao, and to the neutralist faction that eventually allied with it, raised American awareness considerably, and reports late in the year that North Vietnamese troops had moved into Laos prompted the United States to place a multi-service task force at DefCon 2, put an F–101 squadron on alert, and deploy a C–130 squadron to the theater. In the zero-sum game of the Cold War, the Dwight Eisenhower administration saw the threat of the "loss" of Laos to communist control as potentially damaging to U.S. prestige. Such an outcome would also increase the danger for Laotian neighbor South Vietnam, where the United States had invested more heavily and staked more of its reputation.

In South Vietnam in the fall of 1960, there was a subtle shift in the U.S. approach as Lt. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr succeeded Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams as MAAG commander. McGarr took more interest in what was starting to be called counterinsurgency than Williams had, although he remained convinced that these tactics should be more the purview of the paramilitary Civil Guard than the ARVN. As Williams had, McGarr clashed with Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow over several issues, including the MAAG's insistence on a U.S.-funded 20,000-man increase for the ARVN and whether the MAAG should be training the Civil Guard. Durbrow, meanwhile, pushed Washington for authority to predicate additional U.S. aid on South Vietnamese governmental reform.

USAF advisors to the VNAF had new aircraft to integrate into operations as the VNAF fighter squadron received six AD–6s in September. Although

this was a USN airframe, and the Vietnamese pilots received training in the United States from USN aviators, the USAF assumed responsibility for oversight of the planes and their operations and maintenance once they reached Vietnam, as it did USA H–34C helicopters that the USAF began ferrying at the end of the year.

On the communist side in Vietnam, radicals in the south pushed for expanded revolutionary activities and gained an important champion with the election of Le Duan to head the politburo in North Vietnam. Still, old-line communist leaders in the north urged patience and caution in the barely coordinated operations in the south. In December, the north gave more formal structure to the southern communist organizing and insurgency with the founding of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), with the designation of the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) following in February. Neither of the feuding communist powers, the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China, wanted to endorse full-scale revolution in South Vietnam, however, and insurgent activities on the ground increased only incrementally.<sup>1</sup>

### 1960

August: The South Vietnamese government suspended new construction in its controversial agroville program (see Jan. 4), with seventeen of the initially projected nineteen villages completed. A U.S. official in Saigon observed in September that "while the agrovilles may be a success some day, their present effect has not been to improve the status of the government with the people. The reasons are that the government does not pay the workers to construct the agrovilles, that the peasants have been somewhat forcibly uprooted, and that the police and other officials have employed methods not calculated to win friendship for the government." Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow asked President Ngo Dinh Diem in October whether the government could subsidize the peasants who had been relocated, but Diem insisted that they had land and should be able to generate the same subsistence income they had before their move. Diem said he suspended the agroville program because it "costs too much," but Durbrow thought the decision had more to do with Diem wanting to avoid ongoing discontent associated with the initiative in the months leading up to the April 1961 presidential election (see Apr. 9, 1961).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1.</sup> For the purposes of this study, in subsequent chapters, NLF is used in reference to broader communist organizing and community infiltration in the south, while PLAF is used for insurgent military action and troop strength.

<sup>2.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:587 (1st quote), 590-91 (2d quote), 623; Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 85.



Gen. Thomas D. White (*right*) with his mid-1961 successor as USAF chief of staff, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay. USAF.

Also in August, North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh offered to mediate the long-standing dispute between China and the Soviet Union as his government sought ways to maintain good relations with both countries. Although he did not become an emissary in official talks, Ho worked with both camps during an international meeting of communist leaders in November to gain a tenuous agreement that kept Hanoi from having to choose sides. The North Vietnamese continued to carefully navigate between the two powers through the following year. Western observers saw them as more in the Soviet camp, but internally, leaders in Hanoi grew impatient with Moscow's lack of follow-through on promised support for liberation movements (*see Jan. 6, 1961*). China, meanwhile, continued to fear large-scale U.S. intervention in Vietnam if fighting there escalated. Historian Pierre Asselin observed that Ho was "too skeptical of American designs in Indochina" to consider a complete break with the communist powers, as Yugoslavia had done.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3.</sup> Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 80-82, 106-8 (quote, 82).

**August 5**: Gen. Thomas D. White, USAF chief of staff, met with Col. Sourish Don Sasorith, the senior air officer from Laos. Although it was a largely ceremonial visit at the time, the United States would be paying considerable attention to Laos soon thereafter.<sup>4</sup>

August 9: Capt. Kong Le, the U.S.-trained commander of an elite Laotian paratroop battalion, overthrew the government in Vientiane that had been established after the April elections (see Mar.-Apr.). Kong organized the revolt because of concerns about corruption in the government, and in the upper levels of the military. He turned to Prince Souvanna Phouma, a former prime minister, to form a new government, which Souvanna did with himself as prime minister and Gen. Phoumi Nosavan as deputy prime minister and minister of defense. Sisavang Vatthana, the Laotian king, blessed this government, and the new U.S. ambassador to Laos, Winthrop G. Brown, urged Washington to support it. Kong saw Phoumi as emblematic of the corruption against which he and his followers had rebelled, however, and he threatened to shoot Phoumi if the general returned to Vientiane. Brown was not sure that Phoumi really wanted to serve under Souvanna anyway, and with Kong's rejection, Phoumi took the core of the Royal Lao Army with him to Savannakhet, in the Laotian panhandle on the border with Thailand, where Phoumi's cousin, Marshal Sarit Thanarat, was prime minister.<sup>5</sup>

These developments split the Lao military as well as U.S. officials. Ambassador Brown and his country team, including the CIA station chief, backed Souvanna, while the Defense Department and CIA headquarters supported Phoumi. The State Department feared that Phoumi would set up a military dictatorship but believed Souvanna to be too sympathetic to the communists. The United States divided its PEO, with part of the staff working with the Souvanna government in Vientiane and the other with Phoumi's forces in Savannakhet. Through the fall as fissures deepened, the Pathet Lao launched attacks and Kong's neutralist forces seemed to tilt toward the Pathet Lao. A contemporary Fifth Air Force report noted that the "bewildering succession of maneuvers and events... defied analysis by foreign observers." The U.S. administration could not agree on which side to support. Neither President Dwight Eisenhower nor Secretary of State Christian Herter had much interest in, or understanding of, the situation in Laos, and the undersecretaries to whom oversight devolved did not have the authority to make major policy decisions. As Brown later put it, "The

<sup>4.</sup> History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960-31 December 1960, 21.

<sup>5.</sup> Winthrop G. Brown, interview with Larry J. Hackman, February 1, 1968, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 2–7, https://archivel.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Brown,%20Winthrop%20G/JFKOH-WGB-01/JFKOH-WGB-01-TR.pdf (hereafter Brown interview); Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 175–85; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 155–57; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 29; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 95.

instructions that we got from Washington were frequently masterpieces of double-talk instructing us to do contradictory things." Complicating matters even more, U.S. Special Forces were still deployed on training teams with Phoumi's units as well as Kong's, as were French advisors. As an embassy attaché later wrote in reference to the divided missions, "If it seems absurd from a distance, it was sheer madness up close."<sup>6</sup>

With the United States in need of intelligence in Laos beyond what the CIA could gather, during the latter part of August, Lt. Col. Butler B. Toland Jr., USAF, the newly arrived air attaché in Saigon, began lowlevel reconnaissance flights over Laos in his attaché aircraft, a C-47 with USAF markings. Since he was accredited to the embassies in Vientiane and Phnom Penh as well as Saigon, Toland was covered by diplomatic immunity and did not have to file flight plans with the International Civil Aviation Organization. Nevertheless, at times during the autumn, Brown told Toland not to fly into Vientiane, as he feared that an American aircraft would not be welcome. (In general, Brown supported the reconnaissance missions and often defended them up the chain of command.) In keeping with the prohibition against the introduction of foreign troops into Laos, Toland and his crewmen dressed as a civilians when in that country. In addition to the limited military reconnaissance during the fall, Toland photographed all the airfields and airstrips he could locate in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Toland's reconnaissance flights over Laos increased in December after fighting and Soviet involvement intensified (see Dec. 21).<sup>7</sup>

There were no aeronautical charts for Laos, and Air America pilots flew with old French topographical maps. Toland got one of these and

<sup>6.</sup> Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 175–228; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 157–70, 240–41; Brown interview, 6–11, 15 (2d quote, 9); Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 29–30; Arthur C. O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis of 1960–1961," June 1961, AFHRA, 4 (1st quote); Lawrence R. Bailey Jr., *Solitary Survivor: The First POW in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1995), 55 (3d quote), 58; Richard M. Bissell Jr., with Jonathan E. Lewis and Frances T. Pudlo, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 146. For lingering resentment between State and Defense on Laos and the parties supported, see *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:7–8. According to a CIA official history, "From 1955 until the 1960 coup, CIA covert action in Laos had concentrated on the search for enlightened elements within the traditional elite that it could support in a process of political modernization. . . . The 1960 coup nullified these efforts, and CIA, along with the rest of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, now devoted itself to supporting military resistance to the threat of communist takeover." Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos*, *1961–1973* (Washington, DC: CIA, 2006), 1, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/6 UNDERCOVER\_ARMIES.pdf.

<sup>7.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 34; Toland interview, 8-12. Toland recalled in his interview (p. 6) that in predeployment briefings with military intelligence officers and State Department officials, Laos hardly had been mentioned at all, as it was believed to have a "very, very insignificant role. It was just there, and that was about it." According to Ambassador Durbrow, General Williams would not let the military attachés attached to the embassy in Saigon "get too close to the MAAG—they might know some of his dirty linen. He was always raising hell with them and sort of keeping them at arm's distance." Durbrow interview, 43.

found "unreliable" written across several areas. He said flying in Laos "was just done by hit and miss really. We had no radio aids whatsoever," and few landmarks to follow. From the air, "it was just a complete jungle." Toland and his crewmen would draw a line on the map and estimate distance based on time.<sup>8</sup>

August 10: Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale, who many saw as the Pentagon's expert on Vietnam, briefed Lt. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr, USA, who was about to deploy as new commander of MAAG-Vietnam (see Aug. 31). On the 11th, Lansdale followed up with a long memorandum in which he elaborated on several questions McGarr had asked. Lansdale noted that "a number of U.S. officials are certain that there is widespread and growing popular distaste for Diem and his government." He wrote that while "there is some dissatisfaction," Lansdale thought it had been "blown-up by skilled propaganda distortion, and . . . the countering psychological operation simply hasn't caught up with the initial harm and erased it." Lansdale described Diem as "a man of real courage and honesty" and said "I feel sure you are going to cotton to him." Lansdale expected that McGarr would follow closely in the manner Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams had in establishing a strong relationship with Diem and wrote Williams that it was his understanding was that Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, the Army chief of staff, had "hand-picked" McGarr "as the officer closet to you in spirit."9

On the same date, Lansdale offered feedback on a draft of the CIA's pending Special Intelligence Estimate on Vietnam (*see Aug. 23*). His primary criticism was that the document underestimated the insurgents in the south, who Lansdale described as "far more formidable than some guerrillas and terrorists skulking about the swamps and jungles." The communist infrastructure supporting the insurgents was "the result of fourteen years of dedicated, professional work by them," dating back to the previous war, during which they had perfected "their covert organizations and techniques in these very fields of political, psychological, and economic action."<sup>10</sup>

**August 14**: As he approached the end of his tour (*see Aug. 31*), General Williams wrote a memorandum for Diem with recommendations about pending military projects and organization. The first one he highlighted concerning the VNAF was the need for runway repair and construction at Bien Hoa. Williams observed that the perforated steel planking (PSP) runway there was "deteriorating to the point of being a hazard to safe

<sup>8.</sup> Toland interview, 16 (quotes); Williams, USAF in Southeast Asia, 1:239-40.

<sup>9.</sup> *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:501 (6th quote), 528–36 (1st–3d quotes, 532; 4th quote, 535; 5th quote, 536). 10. Ibid., 1:526–27.



The U.S. Army selected Lt. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr to succeed Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams as commander of MAAG-Vietnam, with change of command at the end of August 1960. McGarr served in that billet through July 1962, although the MAAG became sub-ordinate to Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, in February 1962. U.S. Army.

operations." Funding was in place for renovation, but no work had begun. Williams noted that the MAAG Air Force section had "on several occasions informed the appropriate Vietnamese officials as to the urgency of the project."<sup>11</sup>

Williams wanted renovation at Bien Hoa completed before the arrival of new fighter aircraft. Consideration of replacements for the antiquated F–8Fs had been underway for months (*see Mar. 9, Apr. 5–6*). The general reminded Diem that the airframe likely to be sent, the USN AD–6, was "a more complicated aircraft than the F–8F and will require a higher degree of skill from among both operations and maintenance personnel" (*see Sept. 23*). He also pointed out the likelihood of "unforeseen problems" with a new aircraft that could only be solved "by the support and cooperation of all the elements of command."<sup>12</sup>

11. Williams interview, 64. The interviewer noted that Williams quoted directly from documents throughout the interview.

12. Ibid., 65-66.

Next, the MAAG commander turned to the touchy subject of military promotions, particularly within the VNAF. Diem had a history of bestowing commissions and elevations in rank based more on family status and Can Lao affiliation than on merit, to the detriment of quality and morale. Williams observed in his memo that recent promotions in a particular squadron "were given to airmen who, though capable, were far short of being the most deserving." Diem did not change his practices in this area. Lt. Col. Nguyen Cao Ky of the VNAF, who did not join the Can Lao, likened the Diem-era South Vietnamese military to the Soviet Red Army, "where the road to higher rank depended on membership in the Communist Party, and where the officers with the greatest responsibilities were almost invariably not the best fighters, the ablest leaders, but those who had demonstrated party loyalty."<sup>13</sup>

Williams continued with his list of areas in need of improvement, noting that emphasis should be "given to perfecting the air navigational aids in Vietnam," for both military and civil air travel. He added that "MAAG has done all it can in this matter without too much success," so the impetus would have to come from the South Vietnamese government and military.<sup>14</sup>

The MAAG commander also urged Diem to invest significantly more in VNAF base maintenance. By U.S. military standards, the MAAG estimated that the VNAF needed to be spending three times as much annually as it was. "As a result of this low budget," Williams wrote, "all bases are being under-maintained and are deteriorating."<sup>15</sup>

**August 20**: In Quang Nam Province just south of Da Nang, around 100 insurgents attacked an ARVN outpost at Hiep Duc in an area that the South Vietnamese government had considered secure. It was the first larger-scale engagement in the region since the end of the Indochina War in 1954. According to Gen. Tran Van Don, the ARVN I Corps commander, "The

13. Williams interview, 66–67 (1st quote); Nguyen Cao Ky with Marvin J. Wolf, *Buddha's Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002), 77–78 (2d quote); Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:213–14; *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:562–63. At some point in this time frame, Generals Duong Van Minh and Tran Van Don sent memoranda to Diem on the same subject. According to Don, they informed Diem that in light of the increasing communist military threat, he needed to "replace many politicians who had assumed military command and administrative direction of governmental functions, but who were basically incompetent. These people lacked qualifications for their positions and were making financial gain at the expense of the common people." Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1978), 79. Journalist Robert Shaplen observed, however, that because of growing opposition to the government, "Diem and Nhu could no longer afford to select military commanders on the basis of ability, but solely by virtue of loyalty. This naturally tended to inhibit the efficiency of the Army, but the wisdom of such moves, as far as Diem and Nhu were concerned, was borne out" by the military-led coup attempt three months later (*see Nov. 11–12*). Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 141.

14. Williams interview, 68-69.

15. Ibid., 69.

situation was not that serious, but it showed that the Viet Cong already had a real fighting force in Central Vietnam, an area famous for its lack of Communist activity." He added that government officials in the region "not only did not recognize the Communist peril, but also tried to hide the facts."<sup>16</sup>

August 21: South Vietnamese counterintelligence thwarted a coup against Diem's government planned for this date, arresting thirteen plotters. Rumors of potential coups continued to abound, with an overthrow attempt commencing three months later (*see Nov. 11–12*).<sup>17</sup>

**August 23**: A CIA-prepared Special Intelligence Estimate on "Short-Term Trends in South Vietnam" concluded that developments during the year "indicate a trend adverse to the stability and effectiveness of President Diem's government," noting in particular burgeoning criticism of Diem's leadership and the "markedly increased subversive operations" of the Viet Cong. The analysts did not anticipate that Diem's government would collapse within the next year, but they feared that if it did not reverse the deteriorating situation, the government would lose control over much of the countryside, intensifying the political crisis.<sup>18</sup>

**August 30**: Ambassador Durbrow sent a long cable to the State Department outlining the worsening situation, stating that it was "thus now quite clear [that] we are in for [a] prolonged battle with Communist guerrillas with survival [of] Free Vietnam at stake." Estimates placed the strength of the Viet Cong at 5,000, despite South Vietnamese claims to have killed 2,000 insurgents during the first six months of the year. (According to Vietnamese communist records, actual insurgent strength during the fall of 1960 was around 3,000 full-time troops and 7,000 armed irregulars.) Diem's government admitted losses during the first half of 1960 of 1,339, including 260 Civil Guard members and 155 from other armed forces, up significantly from the 793 killed in 1958 and 1959 combined.<sup>19</sup>

Although Durbrow often had been critical of Diem, in this message he described the South Vietnamese president as the "only dedicated anti-Communist nationalist leader in sight." He added that "despite his

17. Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 77.

<sup>16.</sup> Don, *Our Endless War*, 76 (quotes); Miller, *Misalliance*, 205. Ronald Spector described a similar engagement in Quang Nam Province in September. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 355.

<sup>18.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 10:1298.

<sup>19.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:544; Victory in Vietnam, 66–67. According to the latter source (p. 67), "the weapons and equipment of these full-time [insurgent] troops were mostly items our soldiers and civilians had captured during the general uprising, together with items we had cached in 1954 and some home-made weapons and equipment. The weapons of the guerrillas and self-defense forces consisted primarily of knives, halberds, cross-bows, spears, scythes, etc., together with a few guns captured from the enemy."

shortcomings," Diem "has recently taken useful steps we've been urging on him for a long time," a sentiment Durbrow would not hold for long (*see Sept. 16, Oct. 14*). The ambassador noted the prospect of "long, unstable conditions in Laos" (*see Aug. 9*) and included that among the reasons it was "essential [to] back up our investment here by reinforc[ing] assistance to Diem."<sup>20</sup>

At this point, the U.S. Defense Department still had not given approval for U.S. Special Forces to train the South Vietnamese Civil Guard in counter-guerrilla tactics, a debate that escalated through the fall (*see Feb. 15, May 30, Sept. 1, Nov. 27*). Special Forces trainers with the ARVN had been reduced to only ten men. Durbrow lobbied that those ten be allowed to stay beyond their October 1 commitment and work with the Civil Guard, and that forty additional trainers be sent by the end of the year. Diem had requested 100 trainers for the Civil Guard, but Durbrow thought 50 was the "practicable maximum at present," with all to be carried within the MAAG limit of 685 uniformed personnel. The U.S. military extended the few trainers with the ARVN for a matter of weeks but withdrew them in November.<sup>21</sup>

**August 31**: General Williams ended his five-year tour as commander of MAAG-Vietnam, replaced by Lt. Gen. Lionel McGarr (*see Aug. 10*). Ambassador Durbrow described McGarr as "so much better than Williams [that] it wasn't even funny." McGarr was more of an advocate for irregular warfare than Williams had been and commissioned a comprehensive study on "Tactics and Techniques of Counter-Insurgent Operations." In reference to counterinsurgency emphasis and training, Durbrow said that McGarr "really stepped it up in a big way."<sup>22</sup>

McGarr later wrote, while defending his actions during his first year in command, that "the situation here was much more critical than had been indicated to me in my briefings enroute" (*see Aug. 10*). He found that "we did not have the required sense of urgency," either in Saigon or in Washington,

20. FRUS 1958–60, 1:544–45. See 545 n. 3 for an August 25 report from the embassy on the Diem government's perceived progress.

21. Ibid., 1:545-46; FRUS 1961-63, 1:62-63.

22. Durbrow interview, 20 (1st quote), 35 (2d quote), 40; Whitlow, "U.S. Military in South Vietnam," 93; U.S.-Vietnam Relations, v. 2, book IV.A.4, sect. 1, 6.1; Spector, Advice and Support, 365–66, 379; Robert Buzzanco, Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62, 72–73; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 236. Diem had lobbied to have Williams's tour extended, while Durbrow had attempted to have it cut short. FRUS 1958–60, 1:492–93, 501. McGarr, while commander of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, had overseen the addition of courses on unconventional warfare to the curriculum. When McGarr arrived in Saigon, he had the staff college send him "everything we had" on counterinsurgency, only to be "a little taken aback of how little we had in the implementing phase." Gregory A. Daddis, No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness in the Vietnam War (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 32–33.



At North Vietnam's third National Party Congress, held in Hanoi in September 1960, delegates elected Le Duan (*left*) as first secretary, which made him head of the politburo. Le Duan was from the south and had closer ties and sympathies with southern insurgents than did the old guard led by Ho Chi Minh (*standing*), who Le Duan eventually eclipsed and ultimately replaced. *Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech.* 

to address the worsening problems. He jousted with Durbrow over requests to increase the size of the South Vietnamese military (*see Sept. 6*).<sup>23</sup>

Maj. Gen. Theodore R. Milton, USAF, who became commander of Thirteenth Air Force in 1961, found McGarr to be "an immensely suspicious man, and pretty much confined to the Saigon area." When Milton visited the MAAG in October 1961 as part of the Taylor-Rostow mission (*see Oct. 18–24, 1961*), the review group observed that the MAAG "was not really getting out into the hinterlands." Senior officials on that team took a negative view of McGarr.<sup>24</sup>

**September**: The Vietnamese communists held their third National Party Congress, the first in nine years. Congregants in Hanoi emphasized northern economic efforts over southern insurgency, to the consternation of representatives from the south. The congress did, however, name Le Duan, who had roots in the south and was known to be more radical (*see Apr. 20*), as first secretary of the party and thus head of the politburo. This selection was a significant step in the rise that saw Le Duan eventually

<sup>23.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:348 (quote), 349.

<sup>24.</sup> Theodore R. Milton, interview with Capt. Mark C. Cleary, July 9, 1982, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 01052978, p. 105 (hereafter Milton interview).



A VNAF Sikorsky H–19 Chickasaw helicopter at Tan Son Nhut airport on the outskirts of Saigon. As the MAAG considered how to improve ARVN and VNAF effectiveness against insurgents, upgrading from H–19s to H–34s became a priority. It took until the end of 1960, however, before bureaucratic hurdles could be surmounted for the USAF to deliver the first group of H–34s. While the H–19s and H–34s came from the U.S. Army inventory, they were under USAF auspices in Vietnam because the USAF advised the VNAF. USAF.

eclipse and ultimately succeed Ho Chi Minh as leader of North Vietnam. The new politburo and central committee included more members with southern ties and militant sympathies.<sup>25</sup>

By later 1960, the North Vietnamese were nearing completion of their land reform and collectivization program, with high levels of participation but mixed results. Meanwhile, efforts at industrial development, centered in and around Hanoi, were "chaotic," according to communist partners in the endeavors. Historian Lien-Hang T. Nguyen found that "Eastern European sources reveal that the North Vietnamese leadership launched an overly ambitious program, ignoring the fact that an agricultural country could not be transformed into an industrial one overnight."<sup>26</sup>

In South Vietnam, regional and local communist committees moved ahead with their own agendas, organizing mass uprisings in multiple villages during September. These efforts grew during the fall and affected hundreds of villages in the Cochinchina region—the southern third of Vietnam. Diem responded with repression, with the senior official of the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group reporting in September that the number of political arrests were "approaching 5,000

<sup>25.</sup> Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 82–87; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 51–53.

<sup>26.</sup> Nguyen, Hanoi's War, 40-41.

monthly, a sevenfold increase over a year ago." He added that "I think history shows that whenever a government reacts to unrest by increasing greatly the number of arrests, it may be an indication that a government lacks constructive solutions to its troubles. Presumably, very few of the persons arrested can be active communists, or the security situation would long since have eased. In any case, the arrests do not endear the government to the people."<sup>27</sup>

September 1: The Joints Chiefs of Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense ordered MAAG and CINCPAC to send representatives to Washington to discuss the "deteriorating situation in South Vietnam" (see Aug. 30). In a document MAAG prepared for these Pentagon meetings, staff officers described steps that could be undertaken to "strengthen stability." One recommendation was to increase the ARVN from 150,000 to 170,000 men, a plan Ambassador Durbrow opposed (see Sept. 6). The MAAG also outlined how it could undertake training of the Civil Guard, including in counterinsurgency tactics, provided that Diem would place that force under the Vietnamese defense ministry (see Sept. 6, 13, Nov. 27). The document suggested the replacement of fifteen H–19 helicopters with H–34s, a step first discussed in the spring but not instituted until the end of 1960 (see Apr. 5-6, May 9, Dec. 1). The MAAG staff observed that "additional transport and liaison-type aircraft cannot be justified at this time due to the current utilization rate" but said that if it improved, the Defense Department should consider upgrading the VNAF's two C-47 squadrons with C-123s, which did not happen. The document also noted an "urgent need" for the establishment of a joint operations center to coordinate "close ground support."28

**September 6**: Ambassador Durbrow wrote an unvarnished letter to J. Graham Parsons, the former U.S. ambassador to Laos who had become assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs. Durbrow said General McGarr and the MAAG had used the "panic button telegram" from the Joint Chiefs and the Defense Department as a "mandate" to provide their ideas on improving South Vietnam (*see Sept. 1*). The ambassador believed the document MAAG produced showed that "some of the pent-up military frustrations that we had tried to keep in line were let out of the box" by McGarr's arrival. Durbrow objected to the MAAG proposal to expand the

<sup>27.</sup> Victory in Vietnam, 65–66; FRUS 1958–60, 1:587 (quotes). For the Michigan State advisory effort, see John Ernst, Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998).

<sup>28.</sup> *FRUS* 1958–60, 1:549–57, 564–67 (1st quote, 549; 2d quote, 550; 3d–5th quotes, 554); Spector, *Advice and Support*, 365–68.



Tran Le Xuan, the wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu who was widely known as Madame Nhu, carried out the first-lady hostess duties for her bachelor brother-in-law, Diem. She also was the daughter of the South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, who she was visiting in Washington in September 1960 when she arranged to meet with Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale. Outspoken Madame Nhu would become more of a public figure over the following three years, derisively nicknamed the "Dragon Lady" by the press for her often insensitive remarks. Ahern, *House of Ngo.* 

ARVN by 20,000 men, declaring the need for extra troops "a rather sad commentary on the slowness of the MAAG training during the relatively quiet period 1956–59." Durbrow appreciated McGarr's "cooperative and realistic attitude" on the issue of MAAG training for the Civil Guard after years of "roadblocks" from General Williams (*see Aug. 31*), although he noted in other cables that he disagreed with MAAG insistence on transfer of the Civil Guard to the defense ministry (*see Jan. 27, Sept. 1, 13, Nov. 27*). He did support finding ways to fund H–34 helicopters (*see Sept. 1, Dec. 1*). Overall, Durbrow told Parsons that "there is no question that Diem's situation is fairly serious, but it is not now desperate, and I do not feel that any crash aid program or pushing the panic button will make the situation better."<sup>29</sup>

All of these issues remained pending for the rest of the year or longer. The only point on which all parties agreed was that the VNAF needed H–34 helicopters to upgrade its H–19s, but it took until the end of December for funding sources to align so the USAF could deliver them (*see Dec. 1*).

29. FRUS 1958-60, 1:557, 560, 564-67 (1st-5th quotes, 564; 6th quote, 566; 7th quote, 567).

Debate continued on ARVN expansion, with Durbrow at first opposing it, then shifting to the position that he would support it if Diem would carry out reforms discussed in mid-October (see Oct. 14). While Durbrow clashed with Diem over the necessity of 20,000 additional troops, he stood with the South Vietnamese president as Diem continued to reject MAAG insistence that he transfer the Civil Guard from the interior ministry to the defense ministry. MAAG and the U.S. military would not support U.S. Special Forces training of Civil Guard troops without the transfer of the Civil Guard to the same ministry as the ARVN, so training and command could be coordinated. Diem finally conceded on this point in late November, but related issues still remained (see Nov. 27). Durbrow, with prodding from the State Department, eventually agreed to the MAAG position on force expansion as part of the long-pending counterinsurgency plan that the embassy submitted to Washington in January (see Apr., June 30; Jan. 4, 1961), but Durbrow and the embassy staff so loaded what McGarr called the "comprehensive political-psychological-economic sections" of the plan with "sweeping political reforms" to the point that Diem was loath to accept the resulting document (see Feb. 13, 1961). Even as the United States ostensibly agreed to 20,000 additional ARVN billets in the first part of 1961, it provided no funding for them until May (see May 20, 1961), and there was little movement to fill them until the summer of 1961, by which time the United States was already considering further expansion of the ARVN to 200,000 men (see June 9, 14, 21, Aug. 4, 1961).<sup>30</sup>

**September 7**: Tran Le Xuan met with General Lansdale in Washington, at her request. Tran, better known as Madame Nhu, was the wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu, daughter of the South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, and fulfilled most of the functions of a first lady as official hostess in the presidential palace for Diem, her bachelor brother-in-law. This highly unusual, outside-of-channels encounter with a USAF officer demonstrated how much Diem and his family still trusted Lansdale's insights on relations with the United States. Lansdale reported to Desmond Fitzgerald of the CIA's Far East Division that Madame Nhu asked why the United States seemed to be taking an "equivocal position" toward Vietnam, with Ambassador Durbrow continually expressing concerns about how Diem was running the government rather than offering unqualified help (*see Apr. 7, Sept. 16, Oct. 14, Dec. 31*). She also questioned why the United States "seems to be trying to make love to Sihanouk in Cambodia" instead of taking "a firm stand" with South Vietnam on their border issues (*see* 

<sup>30.</sup> Ibid., 1:621, 626–31, 677, 685, 688, 694–96, 699, 710–13, 719–20, 738. For General McGarr's recollections of the jousting over ARVN expansion and the counterinsurgency plan, see *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:348–52 (1st quote, 349; 2d quote, 350).
June 5). Additionally, Madame Nhu wanted to know why most of the Americans being assigned to South Vietnam were not as friendly toward the South Vietnamese leadership as General Williams had been. Lansdale told her that he had met with General McGarr before he deployed (*see Aug. 10*) and thought he would continue in the positive manner that Williams had. He also encouraged her to make more of an effort to develop better relations with the Americans in South Vietnam. Lansdale observed in the note to Fitzgerald that "she is usually aloof and could do much more in making friendly overtures." Although Madame Nhu was receptive to this advice, she did not heed it and over subsequent years became a lightning rod for critics of the Diem administration, both in Vietnam and in the United States, gaining the nickname "the Dragon Lady."<sup>31</sup>

**September 9**: In response to a State Department query about whether additional measures could be taken to improve counterinsurgency capability in South Vietnam, the Defense Department replied that the existing military assistance program was adequate, but that the United States should "be sure that the country team is exerting appropriate efforts to aid the administration in effecting needed political reforms." Army historian Ronald Spector found this statement to be an "interesting comment," as the MAAG had "usually opposed as impolitic and unwise efforts to bring about political reform in the Diem regime."<sup>32</sup>

**September 13**: In a Defense Department memorandum titled "Possible Courses of Action in Vietnam," General Lansdale started by noting that "conditions in Vietnam are deteriorating." He observed that "while criticism of Diem's government in metropolitan areas adds to his problems and interacts with Viet Cong plans, the Viet Cong remains the primary threat to security." Lansdale saw Diem as the only hope for stability. He wrote that while Diem should be "informed as soon as possible through appropriate channels of the gravity with which the U.S. government views the internal security situation," it was also imperative that he be assured "of our intent to provide material assistance and of our unswerving support to him in this time of crisis." The USAF general thought the MAAG needed to be staffed "to a greater [extent] with officers skilled in the conduct of counterguerrilla operations," a point Ambassador Durbrow had been making. Lansdale also agreed with Durbrow that MAAG should be training the

<sup>31.</sup> *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:568–69 (quotes); Joseph R. Gregory, "Madame Nhu, Vietnam War Figure Who Intrigued and Infuriated, Is Dead," *New York Times*, April 27, 2011, B16. According to a CIA report quoted in the *Times* obituary, "Diem came to think of his sister-in-law like a spouse. She 'relieves his tension, argues with him, needles him, and, like a Vietnamese wife, is dominant in the household."

<sup>32.</sup> Spector, Advisory Years, 363.

Civil Guard but argued that this organization should be moved under the defense ministry "temporarily," a transfer the ambassador and Diem opposed (*see Sept. 1, 6, Oct. 14, Nov. 27*). In one of the first mentions by anyone in this time frame of possible direct involvement of U.S. forces, Lansdale concluded with the suggestion that "if a large-scale operation against the Viet Cong is undertaken by the Vietnamese, the dispatch of Seventh Fleet vessels and Air Force patrols might be useful in deterring sea reinforcements to the Viet Cong."<sup>33</sup>

**September 16**: Pathet Lao forces attacked the Royal Lao garrison at Sam Neua. Beginning on the 17th, Air America, flying out of Bangkok, delivered ammunition and rice to Phoumi's troops throughout Laos. The Royal Lao Army needed the additional support because five of the eight C–47s that belonged to the Lao air force had been captured by Kong Le's forces in the August coup (*see Aug. 9*). The airstrip at Sam Neua fell on the 28th, after which Ambassador Brown limited Air America flights to noncombat areas that were more securely under Phoumi's control. The PEO briefly suspended aid shipments entirely (October 7–17).<sup>34</sup>

On the same date, Ambassador Durbrow suggested to the State Department that he have a "frank and friendly talk with Diem and explain our serious concern about [the] present situation and his political position." Thus began U.S. consideration of an approach that resulted in two démarches that Durbrow presented to the South Vietnamese president a month later (see Oct. 14). General Lansdale thought "the concept of proposing to President Diem a series of constructive moves" was "a sound one" but considered Durbrow "insulting, misinformed, and unfriendly" and said the ambassador would need to "give evidence" to Diem "that he is now acting in good faith" if he expected the South Vietnamese president to listen. CIA director Allen Dulles and Under Secretary of State C. Douglas Dillon endorsed the concepts of pushing Diem "to broaden the base of his government" and sending Ngo Dinh Nhu abroad to a diplomatic post, a concept various U.S. agencies had encouraged during the spring (see Mar.-Apr.). After further consideration, on October 7, Dillon sent Durbrow approval to proceed with the démarches.<sup>35</sup>

Lansdale opposed the proposal to transfer Nhu, writing that it would involve "the traumatic surgery of removing President Diem's 'right arm.'"

<sup>33.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:570-71 (quotes); Spector, Advisory Years, 368.

<sup>34.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 30; William M. Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955–1974: Supporting the 'Secret War," *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 1999–2000, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/ art7.html; O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis of 1960–1961," 5.

<sup>35.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:575–86, 591–93 (1st quote, 576; 2d–6th quotes, 580; 7th quote, 586); Anderson, Trapped by Success, 189.

He added that "whatever the psychological-political beneficial effects on the Saigon intellectual and foreign elements this would have, the U.S. should consider also the detrimental effects this loss would have on President Diem as the strong leader required to carry out the constructive program envisaged by the U.S. Country Team." Durbrow disagreed, writing in October that "the antagonism toward [Nhu] has so increased in the last year that he has become the symbol that represents all the bad and corrupt things in the country. Whether he is the sinister figure he is reputed to be or not, is, as I have said, beside the point; the sad fact is that more and more people think that he is." Lansdale was not fully aware of how much Nhu's influence had grown and was surprised by it during his visits to Saigon in 1961 (*see Jan. 2–14, 1961; Oct. 18–24, 1961*).<sup>36</sup>

**September 22**: The Soviet ambassador in Laos announced that his country would begin airlifting "foodstuffs and other supplies" to the Souvanna/ Kong Le coalition.<sup>37</sup>

**September 23**: The VNAF received six USN AD–6 propeller-driven fighters, as the U.S. military had promised in the spring (*see Mar. 9, Apr. 5–6*), beginning the replacement of VNAF's antiquated F–8F fighter fleet. Diem had grounded all of the F–8Fs after a crash in August. The additional complement of twenty-five AD–6s would not arrive for another eight months (*see May 1961*). These Skyraider aircraft were later redesignated AD–1Hs.<sup>38</sup>

The Pentagon gave consideration to using out-of-uniform USN aviators to fly the AD–6s, but the U.S. military decided to train VNAF pilots instead. The VNAF and its USAF advisors selected six pilots from the 1st Fighter Squadron for training in the United States. Pilots chosen had good proficiency in English and had logged at least 800 hours in F–8Fs. They received 40 hours of basic aircraft instruction at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, Texas, and 40 additional hours of tactical training at Naval Air Station Lemoore in central California.<sup>39</sup>

VNAF activity during 1960 was extremely limited. In the period from August through October, the 1st Fighter Squadron flew only twenty

36. *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:581 (1st–2d quotes), 622 (3d quote). Lt. Col. Nguyen Cao Ky, who later participated in the 1963 coup that overthrew Diem, wrote that "Nhu was the power behind the throne, officially 'counselor to the president' but sort of a shadow president. He led the Can Lao, . . . controlled the secret service, and commanded a palace guard of some 80,000 special troops. Nhu was substantially responsible for the regime's use of political terror, which he often employed for personal criminal purposes." Ky also thought that Nhu was embezzling considerable amounts from U.S. aid money, a belief widely held among many senior South Vietnamese military leaders. Ky, *Buddha's Child*, 71.

37. "History of Pacific Air Forces," 1 July–31 December 1961, AFHRA, v. 1, pt. 2:15 (hereafter PACAF History, July–December 1961).

38. Futrell, Advisory Years, 54–55; Robert C. Mikesh, Flying Dragons: The South Vietnamese Air Force (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2005), 40.

39. Mikesh, Flying Dragons, 37-40.



As the advisors to the VNAF, the USAF supervised operations and maintenance of the AD–6s once they reached Vietnam, but the USN trained the pilots on the aircraft in the United States before shipping the planes. The South Vietnamese pilots are shown here at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, Texas, with their flight instructor, Lt. Kenneth E. Moranville (*white uniform*). USN/Mikesh, *Flying Dragons*.

combat sorties. C–47s of the 1st Air Transport Group managed just thirtytwo sorties during the same time frame. L–19 liaison planes claimed 917 combat hours in an observational capacity for the ARVN. The single H–19 helicopter squadron, using rotary aircraft turned over to the VNAF by the French, recorded only 166 hours involved in operational missions. Diem continued to lobby for H–34s to replace or augment the H–19s (*see Sept. 1, 6, Dec. 1*). As Ambassador Durbrow later observed, "We didn't have very much equipment in there, . . . didn't envision very much air operations taking place at that time."<sup>40</sup>

**September 27**: Prince Norodom Sihanouk, premier of Cambodia, met with President Eisenhower in New York City while both were attending the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Sihanouk subsequently spent five days on an unofficial visit in Washington, D.C.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 55; FRUS 1958-60, 1:590; Durbrow interview, 3 (quote).

<sup>41.</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Visits by Foreign Leaders: Cambodia," http://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/visits/cambodia.

**September 30**: General Thomas White, USAF chief of staff, met with Air Marshal Harin Hougskula, deputy commander of the Royal Thai Air Force, at a time when U.S. military cooperation with Thailand was becoming more important because of instability in Laos. Although Harin sought approval for F–86 training for Thai pilots, discussion of support for aircraft actually in use included C–47s and F–8Fs.<sup>42</sup>

**October**: Separate paths that Vietnamese communist operatives had been clearing on what became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail intersected near the meeting points of the borders of South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The North Vietnamese had begun developing the trail and expanding existing paths in 1959. Establishment of this route increased the importance of Laos to the North Vietnamese government, which provided support that evolved into a nation-building effort in behalf of the Pathet Lao. By late 1960, the Soviets had loaned at least ten small transport aircraft for the North Vietnamese to use in ferrying supplies to Laos.<sup>43</sup>

Also in October, Diem claimed that North Vietnamese regulars operating out of Laos had participated in attacks in Kontum and Pleiku Provinces. South Vietnam made a formal protest to the ICC in November about North Vietnamese involvement. The reports on which Diem based his claims were erroneous, but they highlighted South Vietnamese and U.S. concerns about increasing support from the north for southern insurgent activities.<sup>44</sup>

**October 1**: Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, USA, succeeded Gen. Nathan F. Twining, USAF, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

**October 14**: After a month of U.S. consideration and internal debate (*see Sept. 16*), Ambassador Durbrow delivered two démarches to Diem. The first strongly encouraged governmental reform, while the other recommended reassignment of Ngo Dinh Nhu and Tran Kim Tuyen, head of the intelligence service. The documents annoyed Diem and prompted little action. Some scholars have argued that these démarches contributed to the erosion of confidence between the United States and Diem, but historian Edward Miller pointed out that nearly all of Durbrow's criticisms were ones Diem had been hearing for a long time from U.S. officials. Senior CIA official Chester Cooper observed of Durbrow that his "real problem" was "not style but content. His démarches had a hollow ring,

<sup>42.</sup> History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960-31 December 1960, 22.

<sup>43.</sup> Merle B. Pribbenow, "North Vietnam's Master Plan," HistoryNet, June 12, 2006, http://www. historynet.com/north-vietnams-master-plan.htm (reprinted from *Vietnam* magazine, August 1999); Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 120–22; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 45–46.

<sup>44.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 56; Futrell Chron., 5. South Vietnam filed a formal complaint with the ICC on November 10. FRUS 1961–63, 1:20 n. 6.



Elbridge Durbrow (*right*), the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam from 1957 through April 1961, consistently pushed Ngo Dinh Diem (*left*) to make reforms in his government, often to Diem's irritation. *USN*.

since the ambassador represented no one but himself. Washington was not prepared to back him up, and Diem knew it."<sup>45</sup>

Durbrow did have news on the 14th that pleased Diem: the ambassador had gotten approval from Washington, and cooperation from General McGarr, for the MAAG to begin training the Civil Guard. It was not entirely the arrangement Diem wanted, though, as there was still no provision to train the Civil Guard in counter-guerrilla tactics, a program the South Vietnamese government had been requesting since January (*see Jan. 27, Apr. 19*). The move also apparently was still predicated on Diem transferring the Civil Guard to the defense ministry (*see Nov. 27*).<sup>46</sup>

**Mid-October**: Graham Parsons, the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs and former ambassador to Laos (1956–58), traveled to Vientiane along with John N. Irwin II, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, and VAdm. Herbert D. Riley, chief of staff of Pacific Command. The mission failed at both of its primary tasks—to

<sup>45.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:595–604; Miller, Misalliance, 212, 381 n. 81; Chester L. Cooper, The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), 175 (quote); Spector, Advise and Support, 366–67; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 237. For Durbrow's report on some of the actions Diem did take in October, including replacing four cabinet members, see FRUS 1958–60, 1:622–25.

<sup>46.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:597.

develop coherence in U.S. policy concerning the factions in Laos (*see Aug.* 9) and to steer Souvanna away from association with the Pathet Lao—to the point that Parsons described the endeavor as "a virtual disaster." The divide between State and Defense over how much to support Phoumi's force remained wide.<sup>47</sup>

Parsons, Irwin, and Riley visited Saigon after their time in Vientiane and met with Diem on October 18. Diem used their pessimistic report on Laos to argue for expansion of the ARVN by 20,000 troops (*see Sept. 1*, 6) to increase border security. Parsons found Diem just as intransigent as he had been when Parsons dealt with him while ambassador to Laos and wondered whether his regime had reached its "eleventh hour."<sup>48</sup>

**November 8**: Sen. John F. Kennedy (D) won election as president by a narrow margin over Richard M. Nixon (R), the sitting vice president. Both men had visited Vietnam in the early 1950s and had paid close attention to the French struggles there.<sup>49</sup>

**November 10**: An officer loyal to Phoumi orchestrated a bloodless coup in the Laotian royal capital of Luang Prabang, declaring that he was overthrowing the Souvanna-led government. Souvanna, who was based in Vientiane, the administrative capital, began threatening to attack Luang Prabang, as did the Pathet Lao. Souvanna had placed two Pathet Lao officials in his cabinet on the 9th and had agreed a couple of weeks earlier to accept Soviet aid. Ambassador Brown was still in Vientiane, still trying to work with Souvanna to staunch the leftward drift.<sup>50</sup>

**November 11–12**: Diem's government survived an attempted coup staged by South Vietnamese paratroopers. Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu erroneously believed that certain Americans had encouraged the plotting, increasing their distrust of many U.S. officials. The coup was indicative of the growing frustration that many ARVN and VNAF officers had with the Diem government, its politically appointed officers, and the Diem/Nhucontrolled Can Lao Party. Lt. Col. Nguyen Cao Ky of the VNAF, the future prime minister, who was not a Can Lao member, arranged to have an aircraft available for the plotters to leave for Cambodia, although he later told senior officials that coup participants commandeered the C–47.<sup>51</sup>

49. Williams, USAF in Southeast Asia, 1:57, 80-81, 127, 130, 133-34, 141-42, 145, 148, 165.

<sup>47.</sup> Rust, Before the Quagmire, 218–26 (quote, 218); Anderson, Trapped by Success, 190–92.

<sup>48.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:605-8, 611-13, 621-22 (quote, 613); Anderson, Trapped by Success, 190; Frankum, Vietnam's Year of the Rat, 88.

<sup>50.</sup> Rust, Before the Quagmire, 231–32; Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 31.

<sup>51.</sup> Miller, *Misalliance*, 202–4, 206–7, 211–13; Ky, *Buddha's Child*, 72–75; *FRUS* 1958–60, 1:708; Colby, *Lost Victory*, 78. Cambodia kept the C–47, which became a point of contention between Saigon and Phnom Penh. Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 163.



Tanks on the palace grounds during the November 11–12 coup attempt against Diem and his government. The view is from the residence of William E. Colby, the CIA station chief in Saigon. Colby, *Lost Victory*.

While there had been rumors for months of potential coups (see Aug. 21), Ambassador Durbrow was "shocked" and "stunned" when this one materialized, according to an embassy official. Durbrow claimed that he backed Diem "100 percent" during the uprising, but other State and CIA representatives recalled that the ambassador took a more neutral position, not sure which group would prevail. Durbrow stated that he told the coup leaders that the United States would cut off all aid to Vietnam if they shelled the presidential palace, which they did not end up doing. When General Lansdale visited Vietnam two months after the engagement (see Jan. 2-14, 1961), he found that Diem still believed that U.S. embassy officials were "very close" to the officers who had staged the uprising. Lansdale had already concluded that it was "most doubtful that Ambassador Durbrow has any personal stature remaining" with Diem. For Durbrow, however, the coup attempt and the public response to it reinforced his thinking that the United States had to keep pressing Diem to undertake more reforms (see Sept. 16, Oct. 14, Dec. 4, 31).52

<sup>52.</sup> *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:660–63 (quotes, 662, 663); Currey, *Lansdale*, 227 (1st Lansdale quote); Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 238 (2d Lansdale quote). Adamson (p. 238) noted that after the coup, a growing number of South Vietnamese business and political leaders visited the U.S. embassy to voice their concerns about the direction of the country, and about Diem's leadership. For the ambassador's memories of the coup, see Durbrow interview, 38–40.



ARVN troops arriving in Saigon on November 12 to quash the coup attempt against Diem's government. The uprising deepened Diem and Nhu's distrust of many senior officers in the military. *Lansdale Papers, Hoover Institution.* 

The coup also deepened Diem and Nhu's distrust of the ARVN, including several senior generals. ARVN corps commanders were meeting in Saigon at the time of the coup, although it happened without their advance knowledge. Most of the generals did little during the engagement to aid Diem. Despite General McGarr's advice not to do so, Diem reduced the command authority of several of his generals, some of whom would participate in his overthrow in November 1963.<sup>53</sup>

The USAF air attaché in Saigon, Lt. Col. Butler Toland, lived two blocks from Diem's palace and heard gunfire from the initial attack. He got confirmation of what was happening from the head of the MAAG Air Force section, who lived across the street from the palace. At daybreak, Toland and his assistant attaché made their way to the U.S. embassy, where they remained for two days, cabling situation reports directly to Gen. Thomas

<sup>53.</sup> Don, *Our Endless War*, 78–80, 87. While meeting with Diem on November 17, General McGarr "counseled him to be as lenient as possible in dealing with his generals. I pointed out that he needs their support and assistance in the difficult days ahead, particularly in unifying the army in the face of the communist threat." *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:678. As for how they reacted after being reassigned, Gen. Tran Van Don later wrote that "I have often thought, since the time of the overthrow of the Diem government, that one of Ngo Dinh Diem's greatest errors was to give some of his most efficient and highly regarded generals meaningless jobs. Not only did they become bitter, but they used their time to think, make plans, and perfect strategies. . . . He was as shortsighted in his dealings with [Duong Van] Minh, [Le Van] Kim, and myself as he was with the farmers in the villages." Don, *Our Endless War*, 87.

White, the USAF chief of staff. Toland also suspended all USAF landings at Tan Son Nhut. He recalled that the VNAF "was split more or less; some were for and some were against the coup. I think they were trying to decide which way it was going to go, which side to jump on."<sup>54</sup>

McGarr cabled Lansdale on November 13 that he believed that Diem had "emerged from this severe test in [a] position of greater strength with visible proof of sincere support behind him both in armed forces and civilian population." Journalist Robert M. Shaplen later wrote, however, that it was "difficult to gauge" the support for the attempted overthrow among the Vietnamese. "Most citizens in Saigon were probably neutral; but a surprising number, including government workers and businessmen, later told me they had secretly hoped the coup would be successful, even though they were not prepared to take part in it." Shaplen observed that "the attitude toward Diem and his family had begun to change from disinterest or contempt to animosity, chiefly because of the economic and political regimentation imposed by the government at this time."<sup>55</sup>

**November 17**: Jerome T. French, a civilian on General Lansdale's staff in the Defense Department's Office of Special Operations, cabled Lansdale his findings after three days in Saigon. He wired that the "situation is deteriorating rapidly, as is U.S. capability to render constructive influence." He said that even individuals who had participated in saving the Diem government during the coup attempt were reporting increased "bitterness, dissension, and further demoralization." French also found that the "Viet Cong situation is much stronger than I believe is generally recognized in Washington. I believe that they are rapidly moving towards a position of strength comparable to that held prior to Geneva [in 1954]." He said ARVN intelligence, on which the MAAG still had to rely (*see Jan. 7, Feb. 12, 29, Mar. 10*), indicated that the insurgents "now hold secure pockets [across the] length of [the] country and are beginning to link up such areas in [the] southern region." Lansdale forwarded a summary of French's report to Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates and other senior personnel.<sup>56</sup>

At some point in the week following French's cable, someone proposed that Lansdale make a fact-finding trip to Vietnam. It may have been Lansdale, who was concerned that Durbrow was exacerbating Diem's delicate situation. He also was eager to escape his role as one of the U.S. military's point people for a pending CIA operation in Cuba, which became the Bay of Pigs (*see Apr. 17–19, 1961*). Although many

<sup>54.</sup> Toland interview, 82-86 (quote, 85); FRUS 1958-60, 1:638-39.

<sup>55.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:660; Shaplen, Lost Revolution, 142.

<sup>56.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:669–70 (quotes), 692–93, 713–17. Durbrow (p. 692) was highly critical of French's activities and said he did not contact the ambassador or any other senior officials at the embassy.

in the State Department and in Southeast Asia objected to Lansdale's prospective mission, Durbrow cabled that it "may be useful" if Lansdale would cooperate with the embassy and encourage Diem to undertake reforms. He also saw the benefit for the Pentagon of having Lansdale "obtain [a] firsthand reading of [the] current situation and problems here." Admiral Felt wired Lansdale on December 10 that he did not want him gathering "info on [the] security situation." He told Lansdale to review the pending counterinsurgency plan (*see Apr., June 30, Jan. 4, 1961*) and "work on Diem to do things that are distasteful to him although essential to save his country." Lansdale made some clarification of what he proposed, but Felt remained skeptical and attempted to constrain what Lansdale was allowed to do (*see Jan. 2–14, 1961*).<sup>57</sup>

**November 27**: General McGarr cabled General Lansdale that Vietnamese officials had told him that Diem had finally agreed to move the Civil Guard from the interior ministry to the defense ministry, a transfer the MAAG had long insisted upon as a prerequisite for it to train the Civil Guard (*see Jan. 27, Sept. 1, Oct. 14*). Diem had seemed ready to sign this decree earlier in the week but then had said he would keep part of the Civil Guard under interior. He relented after being told those forces would not be trained. Issues with instruction still remained, however, as the MAAG only had authorization from Washington to train 32,000 of the estimated 54,000 Civil Guard members. The MAAG also was not staffed to be able to instruct these men in counterinsurgency tactics, as Diem had desired since February (*see Feb. 15, Apr. 19, May 30, Aug. 30*). Debate continued on these questions, and little if any training actually began before 1961.<sup>58</sup>

**November 28**: Phoumi launched a general offensive, beginning the civil war in Laos in full measure. Characteristic of the U.S. governmental divide (*see Aug. 9*), Ambassador Brown feared that Phoumi's advance would "torpedo our plan for [a] political solution," while Admiral Felt believed that "at least one Phoumi military victory" was necessary for a sustainable political agreement.<sup>59</sup>

According to a CIA official history, "The fortunes of war had put the United States, and therefore CIA, in the position of favoring a 'bad guy' over a 'good guy.' Many anticommunist Lao regarded Phoumi as 'a crook,' though they tended to see this as mitigated by his pro-American stance." Souvanna's military support at this time came primarily from Kong Le, who, "in CIA's own judgment, was a 'highly competent professional

<sup>57.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:691–92 (1st–2d quotes), 729–30 (3d quote); Currey, Lansdale, 210–16.

<sup>58.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:678, 686, 689-91, 712.

<sup>59.</sup> Rust, Before the Quagmire, 237-38 (quotes, 238); Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 31.

soldier,' an essentially apolitical 'born leader' whose motivation when he staged the August 1960 coup was hostility toward the admittedly 'corrupt bureaucracy' of his own government" (*see Aug. 9*). Souvanna's connections with the Pathet Lao, and Phoumi's opposition to Souvanna and his government, drove Kong Le into an uneasy alliance with the Pathet Lao and acceptance of Soviet aid (*see Dec. 4, 9, 13*).<sup>60</sup>

**December**: The North Vietnamese government announced the founding of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF), and subsequently in February 1961 of the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). The PLAF was the military arm of the NLF but also technically a part of the North Vietnamese army (PAVN). There had long been concern in the north about the need to coordinate the rebel forces. These moves, in which Le Duan played the leading role, formalized the revolutionary movement in the south, somewhat co-opted it, and yet, mostly for diplomatic purposes, attempted to establish it as a separate entity, not directly controlled by Hanoi.<sup>61</sup>

By this point, Le Duan was beginning to establish his associates in senior governmental positions in the north, laying the foundation for ultimate control in North Vietnam. It would take until 1963, however, before he had a firm grip on the party and the support for full commitment to warfare.<sup>62</sup>

On the South Vietnamese side, by late in the year, ARVN units began deploying into what the South Vietnamese government considered critical areas. By early 1961, these troops were providing security for a number of rural areas and beginning to engage in counter-guerrilla operations.<sup>63</sup>

As conditions worsened in Laos, the USAF ferried four H–34s to Laos in December to replace four H–19s that Air America had been operating there. A report had deemed the H–19s "wholly inadequate for flying conditions in Laos," and the Office of the Secretary of Defense "unilaterally arranged for immediate dispatch" of the H–34s. The helicopters came from USMC units in the Pacific—designated HUS–1s with the Marines but came under USAF auspices while in Laos, as USAF coordinated the contract with Air America.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60.</sup> Ahern, Undercover Armies, 49 n. 24.

<sup>61.</sup> Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 87–90, 94–95, 242 n. 95; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 52–53; *Victory in Vietnam*, 67–68. The NLF did not hold its first formal congress until January 1962. 62. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 48–68.

<sup>63.</sup> Whitlow, "U.S. Military in South Vietnam," 94.

<sup>64.</sup> History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960–31 December 1960, 43 (quotes); George R. Hofmann Jr., *Operation Millpond: U.S. Marines in Thailand, 1961* (Quantico, VA: U.S. Marine Corps History Division, 2009), 9, https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/MILLPOND%20corrected%20 FINAL.pdf. U.S. Marines may have initially operated and maintained the H–34s before turning them over to Air America. See Joe L. Leeker, "Air America in Laos III—In Combat," https://www.utdallas. edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/Leeker/history/Laos3.pdf, pp. 5–6 n. 23.



The VNAF had two squadrons of Cessna L–19 Bird Dogs, with one shown here in an exhibition over Saigon in 1958. Although these were designated as liaison squadrons, as the conflict in Vietnam intensified, the low altitude and low airspeed capabilities of these aircraft made them ideal for forward air control missions. *USAF*.

**December 1**: A Defense Department memorandum noted that "because of the worsening internal security conditions in Vietnam, Defense is considering the possibility of giving 11 H–34 helicopters to the Vietnamese as an emergency measure" (*see Sept. 1, 6, 23*). President Eisenhower wrote in the margin, "If we do—then now!" The same document recorded that Defense and State had developed a list of materiel for Cambodia as part of \$900,000 in additional aid recently promised "for political reasons" (*see June 5, Sept. 27*). The memo said the United States would provide jet aircraft training for six Cambodian pilots but that it would not grant the Cambodian request for six jets "because there is no military justification for the aircraft and granting them might have an adverse effect in Vietnam and Thailand."<sup>65</sup>

The question of helicopter upgrades for Vietnam had been pending since the spring (*see Mar. 9, Apr. 5–6, May 9*), held up as various agencies debated how the aircraft could be funded since Congress had cut MAP allocations for the fiscal year. The Joint Chiefs approved the transfer on December 1, but funding issues continued for three more weeks. In the last week of December, the USAF airlifted four USA H–34C helicopters to Saigon to begin replacing the VNAF's antiquated H–19Bs. Due to the urgency, the Army sent these aircraft as-is, with no refurbishment, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense ordered that the USAF move them by "premium transportation" to ensure they arrived before the end of 1960. The USAF ferried six more H–34Cs in January and February 1961 to reach a total of ten, with one more still pending delivery as of the beginning of April.<sup>66</sup>

**December 4**: Ambassador Durbrow cabled the State Department from Saigon, informing Washington that "on [the] surface, life has returned to normal" in the three weeks since the failed coup (*see Nov. 11–12*). However, "just below [the] surface, there is much talk about another coup unless Diem relaxes some controls, puts in effective reforms, [and] takes more effective action to fight [the] VC and give protection to [the] population." Durbrow observed that "unless Diem takes early effective action on the political front, [the] coup has increased chances for development [of] neutralism and for anti-Americanism among those critical of [the government]." The ambassador concluded that the "situation in Vietnam is highly dangerous to U.S. interests." Throughout December, Durbrow continued to press Diem to make substantive reforms (*see Dec. 31*).<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65.</sup> FRUS 1958–60, 1:705. If called on to provide jets, the USAF suggested T–37 or T–33 trainers. History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960–31 December 1960, 43.

<sup>66.</sup> History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960–31 December 1960, 44 (quote); *FRUS* 1958–60, 1:703–4; *FRUS* 1961–63, 1:62; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 55; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 372. Ambassador Durbrow's notes on his December 23 conversation with Diem indicated that the helicopter deal had just received final approval but that the H–34s had yet to be shipped. *FRUS* 1958–60, 1:739.

<sup>67.</sup> *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:707–11 (1st quote, 707; 2d–3d quotes, 709; 4th quote, 711); Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 238–40.



Gen. Phoumi Nosavan's troops in the streets of Vientiane during the mid-December 1960 coup (*left*), and damage to the chancery of the U.S. embassy (*right*) from the poorly directed artillery fire that constituted most of the "battle." After the coup, Kong Le's force left Vientiane and marched to the Plain of Jars. Ahern, *Undercover Armies*.

According to VNAF officer Nguyen Cao Ky, who later became prime minister, "Diem went on the radio after the attempted coup and promised to make changes in the way he governed. Rather than getting more involved in day-to-day matters, however, Diem turned still more power over to the lean and hungry Nhu, who filtered what the president was allowed to hear and see." Ky added that "while Diem failed to make positive changes in his government" after the incident, "Nhu's gestapo clamped down on dissidents, arresting or questioning over 50,000 people. Many innocent civilians were tortured. Dozens were executed."<sup>68</sup>

Also on December 4, the Soviets began aid flights to Vientiane for the Souvanna-Kong Le alliance, flying out of Hanoi with food, fuel, and military hardware. As Phoumi's force approached the Laotian administrative capital a week later, the Soviets airlifted 105mm howitzers and 82mm mortars and North Vietnamese crews to man them. Many of the larger artillery pieces were U.S.-made, captured by the Viet Minh from the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. At the peak of the operation, a U.S. officer observing at Vientiane's Wattay airport counted fourteen Soviet II–14s arriving in one hour.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68.</sup> Ky, *Buddha's Child*, 75–76. Ambassador Durbrow and General McGarr had urged Diem not to mete out such retribution. After talking with Diem on November 26, Durbrow had cabled the State Department that "I detected nothing which would indicate Diem plans to act in [a] vengeful way against [the] rebels and their sympathizers." *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:678, 691 (quote).

<sup>69.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 33–34; Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 243; Bailey, *Solitary Survivor*, 57–58; *Victory in Vietnam*, 87. Kong Le had secured the airport, so U.S. officers had to observe activities from such a distance that they could not get photographic documentation of Soviet and North Vietnamese involvement. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 35 n. 7.

Ambassador Brown believed that the U.S. administration "pushed Souvanna into the arms of the Soviet Union and the Chinese and the Pathet Lao." Thailand, under Marshal Sarit, Phoumi's cousin, had blockaded rice and oil shipments to Vientiane. Souvanna asked Brown for U.S. aid, a course that Brown advised but that Washington rejected. Souvanna then turned to the Soviets for aid, which the Kremlin quickly approved. The United States did get Sarit to ease and ultimately end the blockade, but too late to keep Souvanna from working with the Soviets.<sup>70</sup>

**December 5**: Souvanna formally requested that the United States stop providing arms and ammunition for Phoumi's forces.<sup>71</sup>

**December 9**: With Phoumi's troops moving toward Vientiane (*see Dec. 13*), Souvanna and most of his cabinet left Laos for Phnom Penh, Cambodia. At U.S. urging, the figurehead Laotian king backed a new provisional government that was aligned with Phoumi, with Prince Boun Oum na Champassak as prime minister. With the neutralist/left-leaning Souvanna temporarily out of the picture, although he had not resigned, the sides in the conflict seemed clearer, with the United States and fellow member nations from the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) supporting the Boun Oum-Phoumi contingent and the Soviets and North Vietnamese allied with the forces of the Pathet Lao and Kong Le.<sup>72</sup>

**December 13**: Phoumi launched an assault on Vientiane, taking the administrative capital after three days of conflict that consisted almost entirely of ill-directed artillery fire, some of which severely damaged the U.S. embassy. Kong Le's forces withdrew northward toward sanctuary with the Pathet Lao, whose troops were being supported by Soviet air-dropped supplies (*see Dec. 4*). As historian Seth Jacobs wrote, "The battle for Vientiane was the predictable result of two years of ill-managed [U.S.] policy that had, by the winter of 1960, left neutralist Lao patriots with a choice between surrender or an alliance with Souphanouvong." At the end of December as Kong Le and his neutralist troops reached the Plain of Jars, they forged a tenuous alliance with the Pathet Lao, one that significantly strengthened the Pathet Lao's military capability.<sup>73</sup>

The skirmish over Vientiane was similar to much of the rest of the conflict in Laos. Lieutenant Colonel Toland described it as "kind of like

<sup>70.</sup> Brown interview, 11-12.

<sup>71.</sup> PACAF History, July-December 1961, v. 1, 2:15.

<sup>72.</sup> Rust, Before the Quagmire, 242-44.

<sup>73.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 33–34; Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 244–46; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 129–35, 169 (quote); Bailey, *Solitary Survivor*, 59–64; O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis of 1960–1961," 6.

brother against brother—we will shoot at you and hope you go away, not try to kill them. . . . This went back and forth and one side would gain a little, then the other."<sup>74</sup>

Even with victory secured, Ambassador Brown had "a hell of a time" getting Phoumi and his presumptive prime minister, Boum Oum, "to come to Vientiane and assume control of the place." Brown recalled that "the two or three days after the battle was over were worse than the battle because there was such a terrible disintegration." When Phoumi and Boum did come, they only stayed for a few hours. They maintained their power base in Savannakhet, hundreds of miles from the capitals and from what became the contested areas in and around the Plain of Jars.<sup>75</sup>

Phoumi's coup greatly concerned the Chinese, who began supplying arms to the Pathet Lao and facilitating the delivery of Soviet oil. Over the following year, the Chinese provided weapons and supplies to equip 20,000 troops.<sup>76</sup>

**December 14**: In the midst of the fight for Vientiane (*see Dec. 13*), Admiral Felt ordered all designated units on alert to comprise Joint Task Force 116 if intervention in Laos proved necessary. Felt suggested offensive air action against the Pathet Lao, but SEATO allies did not support this approach. The primary USAF involvement in the task force was to have aircraft and crews available to transport U.S. Marines of the 3d Division from Okinawa.<sup>77</sup>

**December 19**: The Royal Thai Air Force began flying photo reconnaissance missions over Laos in a U.S.-provided RT–33A aircraft. A detachment from the USAF 67th Reconnaissance Tactical Squadron processed and analyzed the data collected.<sup>78</sup>

During the same period, Admiral Felt ordered Lieutenant Colonel Toland to resume low-level reconnaissance flights over Laos (*see Aug. 9, Dec. 21*). Toland rented a house in Vientiane and set up an office there in early January.<sup>79</sup>

**December 21**: Lieutenant Colonel Toland and his crew, flying the USAF C–47 attached to the embassy in Saigon, photographed an Il–14 transport

79. Toland interview, 23-24.

<sup>74.</sup> Toland interview, 13.

<sup>75.</sup> Brown interview, 11.

<sup>76.</sup> Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 96.

<sup>77.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 58; Futrell Chron., 6.

<sup>78.</sup> Futrell Chron., 6; Arthur C. O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis (A Sequel)," January 30, 1962, AFHRA, 20–21; Jeffrey D. Glasser, *The Secret Vietnam War: The United States Air Force in Thailand*, 1961–1975 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 16–17. Marshal Sarit Thanarat, Thailand's prime minister, ended the T–33 flights over Laos in February 1961 after only six successful missions. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 49.



On December 21, Lt. Col. Butler B. Toland Jr., USAF, flying the C-47 attached to the U.S. embassy in Saigon, took this photo of a Soviet Il-14 transport near the Plain of Jars. U.S. personnel had observed Soviet aid flights before this date but had been unable to get photographic evidence of direct Russian participation in Laos. Toland had the photos conveyed to Washington as quickly as possible. *USAF*.

with Soviet markings 100 to 150 miles north of Vientiane, near the Plain of Jars. Toland, aware that he had the first photographic documentation of direct Soviet involvement in Laos, refueled his aircraft in Vientiane and flew on to Bangkok, which had the only darkroom at a U.S. embassy in Southeast Asia. From Bangkok, Toland cabled General White, the USAF chief of staff, about his evidence, and a C–130 from Clark Air Base in the Philippines arrived the next morning to ferry sets of prints for distribution to the Pentagon, CINCPAC, and Fifth Air Force. Within two weeks of the encounter, the Pentagon released the photographs for publication in major periodicals, including *Life* magazine. The USAF awarded Toland the Distinguished Flying Cross for his reconnaissance efforts.<sup>80</sup>

**December 22**: Acting on the photo confirmation Lieutenant Colonel Toland had provided of the Soviet airlift, the United States warned the Soviet Union of its "serious concern" about this activity.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80.</sup> Ibid., 17–22; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 34–35; Bailey, *Solitary Survivor*, 62–63. 81. PACAF History, July–December 1961, v. 1, 2:15.



Communist Pathet Lao troops shown training in 1959. The Pathet Lao was not a particularly well-organized fighting force, but it became much more of a threat after Kong Le and his elite troops allied with it on the Plain of Jars in late December 1960. *Library of Congress.* 

**December 23**: The embassy-attached C–47, with Toland's USAF attaché staff officers at the controls, was struck by .50-caliber fire while taking photographs of Pathet Lao positions over the Plain of Jars. To Toland's knowledge, this incident was the first time since 1954 where a USAF aircraft took communist fire in Southeast Asia. The C–47 was hit again four days later. Photo reconnaissance from these flights around Christmas showed that the airfields at Sam Neua and Vang Vieng in Laos and Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam had been extensively resurfaced since Toland had photographed them in the fall (*see Aug. 9*) and that the airstrip at Vang Vieng had been lengthened to more than 4,000 feet for use as a Soviet airhead.<sup>82</sup>

**December 24**: In a report to the State Department, Ambassador Durbrow said the ARVN estimated the insurgents opposing it at 9,800, up from only 2,000 at the start of the year and 5,000 just four months earlier (*see Mar. 10, Aug. 30*).<sup>83</sup>

**December 28**: Souvanna met with Cambodian leader Sihanouk in Phnom Penh. The former Laotian leader claimed he had been betrayed by the U.S. State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82.</sup> Toland interview, 23; Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 35.

<sup>83.</sup> *FRUS 1958–60*, 1:743. The figure the MAAG generally accepted of insurgents at the start of 1961 was 10,000. *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:355.

<sup>84.</sup> Dommen, Indochinese Experience, 369.

**December 30–31**: The U.S.-supported Boun Oum government in Laos informed U.S. officials on December 30 that five North Vietnamese battalions totaling around 2,500 men had attacked Royal Lao troops in Xieng Khouang Province near the border with North Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs ordered Admiral Felt to put Joint Task Force 116 (*see Dec. 14*) on higher alert, which he did on the 31st, elevating it to DefCon 2. Felt also requested a USAF C–130 transport squadron to support the task force (*see Jan. 2, 1961*), declaring that it "could be the one asset that will keep us from being caught between a rock and hard place." The USAF put an F–101 squadron of the 363d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina, on alert on the 31st but told it to stand down the following day.<sup>85</sup>

Senior national security advisors briefed President Eisenhower on the 31st. Intelligence was extremely sketchy, but they believed that the 1,500 to 2,500 troops moving from the direction of North Vietnam likely were a Pathet Lao force, probably equipped by the North Vietnamese. The advisors feared that these battalions could link with other Pathet Lao units and split the country. The assemblage also discussed Lieutenant Colonel Toland's photographic evidence of Soviet supply flights (*see Dec. 21*), with Eisenhower joking that this was the first time in fifty years he had seen anything useful from a military attaché. The president asked what could be done to improve aerial reconnaissance and approved Air America and Thai flights over Laos (*see Dec. 19*), as well as U.S. U–2 missions. He also authorized the use of four Thai-owned B–26s for potential action against Russian aircraft if the Soviets engaged.<sup>86</sup>

Eisenhower closed the meeting by emphasizing that "we must not allow Laos to fall to the Communists, even if it involves war in which the U.S. acts with allies or unilaterality." He had stated earlier in the discussion that "we cannot sit by and see Laos go down without a fight."<sup>87</sup>

Unknown to the United States at the time, the Boun Oum-Phoumi government knowingly had made a false claim of North Vietnamese participation. A Laotian cabinet minister later admitted that the leaders had done this to show the population that the government "had friends abroad." The Laotian assembly was to meet on January 3 to vote to legitimize the Boun Oum government. On January 26, the Laotians withdrew the charge of direct North Vietnamese involvement.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>85.</sup> Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 250; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 36 (quote); Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 58; Futrell Chron., 6; *FRUS 1958–60*, 16:1025; Nigel Walpole, *Voodoo Warriors: The Story of the Voodoo McDonnell Fast-jets* (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword, 2007), 159. According to a PACAF history, CINCPAC placed PACAF on alert on December 31, with an alert status lasting until May 1961. At the height of the alert, PACAF had 2,507 personnel designated for initial deployment. Of these, 1,160 would have deployed from their home stations, while 579 were in place in Southeast Asia. PACAF History, July–December 1961, v.1, 2:16.

<sup>86.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 16:1025-29.

<sup>87.</sup> Ibid., 16:1028 (2d quote), 1029 (1st quote).

<sup>88.</sup> Rust, Before the Quagmire, 253 (quote); FRUS 1961-63, 24:5, 7.

In discussing the general difficulty in separating fact from fiction, Ambassador Brown later stated that "rumors were a thousand a day in Laos. There isn't a rumor factory in the world as there is in Vientiane." Brown said the British ambassador there told him that his heart sank every time the phone or doorbell rang because there was never good news. When asked by London about a possible successor, the British ambassador replied, "I have the honor to report that as I know of no member of Her Majesty's Foreign Service who has ever been behind the looking glass, I have no suggestions to make."<sup>89</sup>

**December 31**: The State Department effectively pulled its support for Ambassador Durbrow's aggressive efforts to encourage Diem to undertake reforms (*see Sept. 16, Oct. 14, Nov. 11–12, Dec. 4*), cabling Saigon that the embassy had "gone as far as feasible in pushing for liberalization and future exhortation likely [would] be counterproductive." The department told Durbrow to focus on "minimum objectives."<sup>90</sup>

Durbrow had personified the hard-line approach with Diem, in contrast to those like Generals Williams and Lansdale who had advocated for "friendly persuasion," as historian David L. Anderson called it. "There were some difficult questions" in this policy split by the end of 1960, according to Anderson, but "who was correct was hard to determine because the real difficulty was Diem himself. He and his brothers were well aware of the division within American ranks and sought to exploit it." As CIA official Chester Cooper wrote of Durbrow, "Although his blunt and insistent style was what the situation probably required, Diem and his brother [Nhu] found it offensive." With President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Herter paying limited attention to Vietnam by the latter stages of the administration, Durbrow, with the backing of key mid-level managers at the State Department, had been able to aggressively push for Diem to make significant reforms in his government by threatening to cut aid if Diem did not cooperate. That approach ostensibly came to an end as 1960 concluded, with this order from the State Department, a change in administration pending, and Lansdale already on his way to visit Diem (see Jan. 2-14, 1961). Durbrow and the embassy staff continued to exert considerable leverage, however, by making the counterinsurgency plan contingent upon South Vietnamese acceptance of political reforms (see Sept. 6; Jan. 4, 1961). Frederick E. Nolting Jr., who succeeded Durbrow in May 1961, took a much more tactful approach with Diem than his

<sup>89.</sup> Brown interview, 30-31.

<sup>90.</sup> FRUS 1958-60, 1:751 (quotes); Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 240.

predecessor had, but the United States surrendered influence in the process (*see May 10, 1961*).<sup>91</sup>

Anderson wrote that "all of the principal parties mismanaged the critical situation in Vietnam during the final months of the Eisenhower presidency." Diem was "too recalcitrant and manipulative with American officials," while Durbrow was "too rigid and impatient with Diem's faults." In Washington, Lansdale was "too romantic about Diem reciprocating U.S. loyalty," while Eisenhower and Herter "provided inadequate leadership." Anderson observed that "in the absence of top-level direction, the American bureaucratic infighting became intense and overly personal, and the policy became oversimplified."<sup>92</sup>

<sup>91.</sup> Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 201–2; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 175; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 229–31, 240, 252; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 367–68. For a counter viewpoint, see Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, which argues throughout the book that the Durbrow/State Department aggressive tactics during 1960 undercut a significant opportunity the United States had to work with Diem. Adamson (p. 229) believed, however, that "ultimately, the manner in which Nolting played the role that the Kennedy administration scripted for him"—building a close relationship with Diem and not using much leverage against him—"increased the odds that the only way of dealing with Diem would be through his ouster."

<sup>92.</sup> Anderson, Trapped by Success, 202.



Cosmas, MACV.

# Three

# Kennedy Inherits Southeast Asia January–March 1961

The day before John Kennedy delivered his stirring inaugural address on January 20, 1961, outgoing President Dwight Eisenhower and his senior national security team briefed Kennedy and his advisors on the issues of the world they were inheriting. The subject they spent the most time discussing was Laos, the unlikely Cold War hot spot where Eisenhower speculated that Kennedy might soon have to send U.S. troops.

Kennedy was also taking over responsibility for Vietnam. His first extensive briefing on the situation there came from an Air Force officer, Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale, who spent two weeks in Southeast Asia just before Kennedy's inauguration. Lansdale found that the communist insurgents had become more of a threat than had been reported in Washington, and he feared for the future of South Vietnam if its leadership was not willing or able to make systemic changes. His recommendations spurred Kennedy's interest in irregular warfare.

As the United States encouraged greater emphasis on counterinsurgency efforts in South Vietnam during the winter and spring months, the situation in Laos continued to deteriorate. The Kennedy administration began advocating for a settlement there that would leave the country neutral and the communists with little role in the government. The Pathet Lao countered a U.S.-supported anticommunist offensive in February and began advancing in several sectors in March, rendering U.S. hopes for limiting communist involvement increasingly untenable. Kennedy sent out-of-uniform U.S. military personnel into Thailand in March to help bolster the effort in Laos. This initiative included USAF pilots and crews, who prepared for bombing missions in unmarked B–26s that the Air Force brought out of mothballs. A USAF colonel was already in Laos, coordinating U.S. and Lao air efforts and scouting basing locations in the event a full task force deployed.



President John F. Kennedy in January 1961 with the Joint Chiefs of Staff he inherited (*from left*): Gen. David M. Shoup, USMC; Gen. Thomas D. White, USAF; Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, USA (chairman); Kennedy; Adm. Arleigh A. Burke, USN; and Gen. George H. Decker, USA. *National Archives.* 

**January**: In the first part of the month, the United States gave four T–6s to the Royal Lao Air Force, funneled through the Royal Thai Air Force. The Thais provided cursory training for the Lao pilots, and a few Thai pilots deployed into Laos to fly with the Laotian units. Although these T–6s, which the U.S. military considered obsolete, had only light armament, the Laotians put them into immediate combat service, flying air strikes against Pathet Lao encampments on the Plain of Jars, with only limited results (*see Mar. 31*). Ground fire downed one of these planes. The Soviets protested to the U.S. interference in Laotian affairs, but the United States sent six more later in the month. Ambassador Winthrop Brown initially objected to the use of aircraft in the Laotian conflict, fearing it would provoke escalation by the communist countries supporting the Pathet Lao.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1.</sup> O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis of 1960–1961,"14–16, 25–26; Futrell Chron., 6; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 35–39; Harry S. Coleman, interview with Lt. Col. Robert G. Zimmerman, November 16, 1974, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 01018813, pp. 12–13 (hereafter Coleman interview). Colonel Coleman observed that he "never saw any real action" from the Lao pilots "that would make me believe they were fighters" and was never sure they had flown the missions as they described. In contrast, he thought the few Thai pilots "were tigers." In exchange for the Thais providing the T–6s and training, the USAF delivered five T–37 jet trainers to the Thais. History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960–31 December 1960, 44.

Pacific Command dispatched a USAF major to the Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) branch in Savannakhet, Laos, on the border with Thailand, to advise the T–6 pilots, but the major contracted dysentery and was incapacitated for most of his tour. Total USAF staffing in Savannakhet by the spring was three officers and fourteen enlisted, all out of uniform. There was also a T–6 contingent in Vientiane, with USAF support in the PEO, primarily for maintenance, and a USMC aviator assigned to advise the pilots.<sup>2</sup>

Military Assistance Program (MAP) funds for fiscal-year 1961 included money for enhancements at five airfields in Laos, including control towers, communications, and navigational aids. A USAF report at the end of 1960 observed, however, that "the country's ability to install, maintain, and operate the equipment has not yet been demonstrated." Upgrades became even more problematic into 1961 as the security situation in large parts of the country deteriorated. The facilities desperately needed improvements, though. Wattay airport in Vientiane had a steel-plank runway of maybe 5,000 feet that could not accommodate larger aircraft, a small control tower, and a feeble twenty-five-watt nondirectional beacon. There were rough landing strips at Savannakhet, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Paksane, and the Plain of Jars, most of which had been cleared by the Japanese during World War II and barely upgraded by the French. The French controlled the best airfield in the country at Seno outside of Savannakhet but would not allow Laotian or American/CIA operations out of that facility. Lt. Col. Butler Toland found that the "defenses" at Xieng Khouang consisted of one pillbox in a ravine that easily could be surrounded. He had to land his C-47 on a grass field outside of town because the airstrip was not long enough to handle an aircraft of that size.<sup>3</sup>

Toland and his air attaché staff continued reconnaissance flights over Laos (*see Dec. 19, 21, 1960*) in the new year and received a second C-47 with crew to supplement their efforts. According to Toland, Pacific Command "laid on pretty heavy photographic requirements back in January, February, and early March 1961, and we were doing our best to comply with them." From their aerial photographs during January, PACAF's intelligence section identified twenty-five airstrips, forty-nine lines of communication, and nineteen potential "urban" targets. The attaché intelligence flights continued over contested areas until the Pathet Lao shot down one of the U.S. aircraft in March (*see Mar. 23*).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 37; Coleman interview, 8, 26, 70.

<sup>3.</sup> History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960–31 December 1960, 62 (quote); Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:239; Toland interview, 14–15; Coleman interview, 14, 16–17. For Coleman's efforts to get facilities upgraded, see the Late January entry below.

<sup>4.</sup> Toland interview, 23–24, 66–67 (quote); Glasser, *Secret Vietnam War*, 17. According to Toland, he and his staff stopped flying over northern Laos after the shoot-down but continued reconnaissance flights over the Laos panhandle and Cambodia for the duration of his tour. Toland interview, 68.

In Vietnam, by early 1961, the VNAF had six squadrons deemed combat-ready: one AD–6 fighter squadron (which only had six aircraft), two C–47 transport squadrons, two L–19 liaison squadrons, and one H–19 helicopter squadron, which was in the process of being upgraded to H–34s (*see Dec. 1, 1960*).<sup>5</sup>

**January 1**: Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the head of state of Cambodia who was giving sanctuary to Prince Souvanna Phouma of Laos (*see Dec. 28, 1960*), called for a Geneva conference to settle the crisis in Laos. China immediately endorsed the proposal, while President Dwight Eisenhower, to whom Sihanouk addressed a letter of this date, replied on January 16 that the concept was receiving "serious study" in Washington. Eisenhower stated that the "crux of the matter" where the United States was concerned was how to establish "reliable assurance" against ongoing outside intervention in Laos.<sup>6</sup>

**January 2**: The USAF 773d Troop Carrier Squadron from Stewart Air Force Base, New York, arrived at Clark Air Base in the Philippines on standby to support Joint Task Force 116 if it formed (*see Dec. 14, 1960*). It was assisted by a combat airlift support unit from 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo) out of Tachikawa Air Base, Japan. Adm. Harry Felt, the CINCPAC, had requested this C–130 squadron for the task force as the situation in Laos worsened (*see Dec. 30–31, 1960*).<sup>7</sup>

At a White House meeting, senior advisors informed President Eisenhower of reluctance by allies to consider intervention in Laos. Eisenhower was "very impatient with the French," according to a memorandum of conversation. He also disagreed with SEATO military planning that focused on population centers, stating that he "didn't see much sense in just trying to hold isolated points." The president declared that "if one finds it necessary to use force, one should use enough force to ensure that this situation is cured." He did not want to "leave a running sore or to fight under self-imposed limitations as we had in Korea."<sup>8</sup>

As discussion turned to the ongoing Soviet airlift to Pathet Lao forces (*see Dec. 4, 1960*), James H. Douglas Jr., the deputy secretary of defense, suggested that if the United States had allied backing, particularly from the British and the French, U.S. fighter jets could stop the Russian aid sorties. Eisenhower feared that if the buildup continued, the Soviets would bring

<sup>5.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 67.

<sup>6.</sup> Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 73-74; FRUS 1961-63, 23:145-46 (quotes).

<sup>7.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 58; Futrell Chron., 6.

<sup>8.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:1–4 (1st quote, 2); Rust, Before the Quagmire, 252 (2d–4th quotes). The United States had already sent a warning to the Soviets of its "serious concern" about the airlift (see Dec. 22, 1960).

in their own fighters. The group agreed to a State Department proposal to send a "somber warning" to the Soviets, which was not well received and may have contributed to Nikita S. Khrushchev's public declaration of support for "wars of national liberation" later in the week (*see Jan. 6*).<sup>9</sup>

January 2–14: Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale visited Vietnam for the first time in two years. At this point he was still assigned to the Office of Special Operations within the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Lansdale conceived the trip soon after the coup attempt against President Ngo Dinh Diem's government two months earlier (see Nov. 11–12, 17, 1960), initially planning to spend several weeks in the region touring extensively in Vietnam and visiting other Southeast Asian capitals. Even though Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow saw some potential good in Lansdale's mission (see Nov. 17, 1960), the State Department, which in general had long distrusted Lansdale, vetoed stops anywhere but Saigon. Admiral Felt also initially opposed Lansdale's trip, then issued orders to constrain it. Despite Lansdale's past work detailed to the CIA, that agency was concerned that the visit represented a Defense Department effort to control or influence its mission in Vietnam. Adding to the intrigue, a rumor began circulating in official circles that incoming President John Kennedy might name Lansdale as ambassador to Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

Against this backdrop, Lansdale did what he could to get an unfettered view of the situation. He circumvented U.S. military restrictions on his travel by having Diem loan him an ARVN helicopter and pilot. Lansdale also had several private conversations with Diem and his powerful brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Lansdale was surprised by how much Nhu's influence with Diem had increased (*see Sept. 16, Dec. 4, 1960*). The CIA's Saigon station chief, William Colby, reported that Lansdale came away from the CIA briefings "with the conclusion that I hoped he would: that the conflict was essentially a guerrilla war and that the military approach was not the answer." Lansdale's report and contemporary correspondence indicate that he did not need convincing from the CIA.<sup>11</sup>

Lansdale understood that Diem likely would not want Nhu out of the country, such as in an ambassadorship like some Americans had proposed (*see Mar.–Apr. 1960; Sept. 16, 1960*), but he suggested to Diem that public

<sup>9.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:3-4; Rust, Before the Quagmire, 252-53 (quote).

<sup>10.</sup> Currey, *Lansdale*, 213–18; Edward G. Lansdale, interview with Dennis J. O'Brien, July 11, 1970, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 1–3, https://archive1.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Lansdale,%20 Edward/JFKOH-EL-01/JFKOH-EL-01-TR.pdf (hereafter Lansdale interview [1970]).

<sup>11.</sup> Currey, *Lansdale*, 218–19 (quote); Edward G. Lansdale, interview with Maj. Kenneth J. Alnwick, April 25, 1971, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 01000329, pp. 71–72 (hereafter Lansdale interview [1971]). Currey noted (p. 218) that "for Colby to take credit for Lansdale's view is much like a minister who preaches to his church choir; they are already among the converted."

MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

From: BrigGen Lansdale, OSO/OSD

Subj: Vietnam

As desired by you, I visited Vietnam 2-14 January 1961. After twelve days of intensive looking and listening over some old familiar ground, I have come to the following personal convictions:

a. 1961 promises to be a fateful year for Vietnam.

b. The Communist Viet Cong hope to win back Vietnam south of the 17th Parallel this year, if at all possible, and are much further along towards accomplishing this objective than I had realized from reading the reports received in Washington.

c. The free Vietnamese, and their government, probably will be able to do no more than postpone eventual defeat - + unless they find a Vietnamese way of mobilizing their total resources and then utilizing them with spirit.

d. The U. S. team in Vietnam will be unable to help the Vietnamese with real effectiveness, unless the U.S. system of their operation is changed sufficiently to free these Americans to do the job that needs doing, and unless they do it with sensitive understanding and wisdom.

e. If Free Vietnam is won by the Communists, the remainder of Southeast Asia will be easy pickings for our enemy, because the toughest local force on our side will be gone. A Communist victory also would be a major blow to U. S. prestige and influence, not only in Asia but throughout the world, since the world believes that Vietnam has remained free only through U.S. help. Such a victory would tell leaders of other governments that it doesn't pay to be a friend of the U.S., and would be an even more marked lesson than Laos.

f. Vietnam can be kept free, but it will require a changed U.S. attitude. plenty of hard work and patience, and a new spirit by the Vietnamese. The Viet Cong have been pushing too hard militarily to get their roots down firmly and can be defeated by an inspired and determined effort.

The first page of Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale's report from his fact-finding mission in South Vietnam, from the Pentagon Papers. It was the first detailed document about Vietnam that Kennedy read after becoming president, leaving him convinced that the problems there ultimately would be worse than the ones in Laos (see Jan. 26).

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As Lansdale returned from Vietnam, Felt ordered him to write his report at Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu before traveling on to Washington. Lansdale opened with the observation that the "Viet Cong ... are much further along" with their efforts in South Vietnam "than I had realized from reading the reports received in Washington." He declared that 1961 would be a "fateful year for Vietnam" and stated that Diem's government "probably will be able to do no more than postpone eventual defeat" without systemic changes. In Lansdale's view, the way forward was to find "a Vietnamese way of mobilizing their total resources and then utilizing them with spirit."<sup>13</sup>

Lansdale believed that the United States needed comprehensive changes in its approach to Vietnam. He wanted the MAAG more involved in field work in contested areas and the U.S. embassy purged of fatalistic, anti-Diem elements (*see Nov. 11–12, 1960*). Lansdale saw no alternatives to continuing U.S. support of Diem but posited that a trusted American might be able to start preparations for a legal succession. Lansdale described such a U.S. official several places in his report in what seemed a thinly veiled application for a role for himself back in Vietnam. Kennedy was intrigued by Lansdale's findings and seriously contemplated naming him ambassador (*see Jan. 26, 28*). The new administration also came to accept Lansdale's view that Diem's cooperation would be directly tied to the level of confidence he felt in the U.S. officials with whom he worked, shifting away from the more strident approach that Ambassador Durbrow had taken with the South Vietnamese leader (*see Dec. 31, 1960*).<sup>14</sup>

After he returned to Washington, Lansdale also wrote a memorandum about his visit with Father Nguyen Loc Hoa, a Catholic priest exiled from

<sup>12.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:17-18.

<sup>13.</sup> Currey, *Lansdale*, 222–23; Landale's report in *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 11:1–12 (quotes, 1). Despite the contention between Felt and Lansdale over the mission, Lansdale reported to Diem that he had "good talks" with Felt and his staff at Pacific Command while on his way back to Washington. Felt was "extremely interested" in Lansdale's findings and dispatched a general officer from his staff to visit Saigon. *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:21.

<sup>14.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:1–12; Currey, Lansdale, 222–24; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 242–44. There is almost no mention of Lansdale's interaction with the MAAG in accounts of the trip or in his interviews. He had briefed Lt. Gen. Lionel McGarr before McGarr deployed as MAAG commander (see Aug. 10, 1960), and McGarr had continued to communicate directly with Lansdale (see Nov. 27, 1960), as his predecessor had done.



General Lansdale (*center rear*) in the village of Binh Hung with Father Nguyen Loc Hoa (*far right with dark glasses*) and his militia, which was known as the Sea Swallows. President Kennedy was so impressed with a piece that Lansdale wrote about Hoa and his followers that he had Lansdale arrange for its publication. USAF.

China who was leading an anticommunist rebel group against insurgents on Ca Mau Peninsula at the southern tip of Vietnam. Kennedy was fascinated by the piece and had Lansdale arrange to have it printed, anonymously, in May in the *Saturday Evening Post*, where it appeared under the title, "The Report the President Wanted Published." Although Diem had placed Hoa and his followers in this isolated area, he started providing government aid to Hoa's efforts after publication of the article. Pacific Command and the MAAG arranged U.S. military aid by the end of the year.<sup>15</sup>

**January 3**: In a discussion of Laos with national security principals, President Eisenhower stated that "the harsh facts are that if the communists establish a strong position in Laos, the West is finished in the whole Southeast Asia area." However, Eisenhower was "in full agreement that we must do everything that can be done by peaceful means" before resorting to intervention. Secretary of State Christian Herter reported that Marshal Sarit Thanarat of Thailand "is being very cautious about taking military action in the area unless he is given SEATO backing. Specifically, he is

<sup>15.</sup> Currey, *Lansdale*, 219–21, 225, 391 n. 23; An American Officer, "The Report the President Wanted Published," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 20, 1961, 31, 69–70; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:195; Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 156.

very slow regarding the use of the RT–33s for reconnaissance purposes" (*see Dec. 19, 1960*).<sup>16</sup>

January 4: After months of planning by the MAAG and embassy staffs (see Apr. 1960; June 30, 1960), the embassy in Saigon submitted to the State Department the "U.S. Plan for Counterinsurgency in South Vietnam." It called for the 20,000-man increase to the South Vietnamese military that the Diem and the MAAG had sought (see Sept. 1, 6, 1960), to be funded by the United States at a cost of \$28 million. Under the plan, the United States would also finance expansion of the Civil Guard, which would be transferred to the defense ministry, a move the MAAG had advocated since the force was created in 1955 but which Diem and the U.S. State Department had long opposed (see Sept. 6, Nov. 27, 1960). The document declared Diem's government the "best hope" for defeating the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) but outlined a series of reforms expected of the South Vietnamese. Lt. Gen. Lionel McGarr, the MAAG commander, later blamed Ambassador Durbrow and the embassy staff for overloading the document with what he called the "quid pro quo" of political reforms that made the plan less palatable for Diem and his government (see Sept. 6, 1960; Feb. 13). The incoming Kennedy administration approved most parts of the counterinsurgency plan at the end of the month (see Jan. 28) but did not actually make funding for ARVN expansion available until mid-year (see May 20).<sup>17</sup>

In the official U.S. Army history, Ronald Spector observed that the counterinsurgency plan was "really not a new departure" and "represented a culmination of the traditional American approach to Vietnamese problems." When faced with the rapidly deteriorating security situation in 1960–61, "American military leaders fell back on organizational, technical, and bureaucratic measures as the most appropriate devices to combat the Viet Cong." According to Spector, most U.S. leaders continued to believe that the multitude of South Vietnamese problems with corruption, incompetence, and repression "could be resolved simply by persuading or pressuring our ally into adopting the appropriate 'programs' or administrative remedies."<sup>18</sup>

**January 6**: Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev declared that "wars of national liberation" deserved full communist support, heightening U.S. concerns about situations across the Third World. The North Vietnamese leadership, in large part because of Khrushchev's reluctance to support or

<sup>16.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:5.

<sup>17.</sup> Spector, Advice and Support, 371-72; FRUS 1961-63, 1:1-12, 349-50 (quote, 350).

<sup>18.</sup> Spector, Advice and Support, 372.

even encourage their revolutionary effort, had drifted toward the Chinese camp in the Sino-Soviet dispute (*see Aug. 1960*).<sup>19</sup>

Historian George C. Herring observed that while Khrushchev's speech was "seemingly militant," it in fact "defied Kremlin hard-liners and the more aggressive Chinese by renouncing conventional war, and it may even have been intended to reassure the West. To the untutored ears of the inexperienced Kennedy administration, however, it appeared a virtual declaration of war, and stepped-up Soviet aid to [Fidel] Castro's Cuba and insurgents in the Congo and Laos seemed to confirm the magnitude of the threat." As State Department official Paul M. Kattenburg later put it, the new administration's "globalistic thinking saw in Soviet sponsorship of national liberation wars a maximal challenge to America's own preferred schemes and models for development and progress in the Third World."<sup>20</sup>

**January 7**: When aerial reconnaissance, including U–2 missions, failed to confirm any direct North Vietnamese military involvement in Laos (*see Dec.* 30-31, 1960), Admiral Felt reduced the readiness status of Joint Task Force 116 to DefCon 3 and that of the rest of Pacific Command to DefCon 5.<sup>21</sup>

On the same date, four B–26s that the Eisenhower administration had requested be sent for possible use over Laos arrived at Takhli, Thailand, with four others in the process of being scrubbed of USAF markings but apparently not sent. The planes came under the command of Maj. Harry "Heinie" Aderholt and his crew of CIA/USAF and Air America pilots and support personnel (*see Jan. 1960*) and figured prominently in the spring during discussions of potential covert U.S. intervention (*see Mar. 9, 13*).<sup>22</sup>

**January 16**: Gen. Phoumi Nosavan's Royal Lao forces captured Vang Vieng, a key point along Route 13 that had been the forward airhead for Soviet supply flights for the Pathet Lao (*see Dec. 23, 1960*). Phoumi's advance soon stalled, however, and he requested that the United States use the B–26 bombers against Kong Le's defenses. U.S. advisors countered that the Laotians should be making better use of their T–6s.<sup>23</sup>

19. Miller, Misalliance, 215 (quote); Futrell, Advisory Years, 56; Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 78–82.

20. George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975. 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 92; Kattenburg, Vietnam Trauma, 84–90, 109 (quote).

21. Rust, Before the Quagmire, 253; Futrell Chron., 6.

22. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 36; Trest, *Air Commando One*, 110; Timothy N. Castle, "Operation Millpond: The Beginning of a Distant Covert War," *Studies in Intelligence* 59 (June 2015): 6–7, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-59-no-2/pdfs/Castle-MILLPOND-June-2015.pdf. Trest (p. 110) said that the first of the B–26s reached Takhli in December.

23. Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 39-40.



At a January 19 transition briefing for the new administration, President Dwight D. Eisenhower talked more about Laos than any other subject. From left: Secretary of Defense-designate Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense Thomas S. Gates Jr., Secretary of State-designate D. Dean Rusk, Secretary of State Christian A. Herter, President-elect Kennedy, President Eisenhower, Secretary of the Treasury Robert Anderson, and Secretary of Treasury-designate C. Douglas Dillon. *Kennedy Library.* 

**January 17**: D. Dean Rusk, the secretary of state-designate and a veteran State Department official with long experience in Asian affairs, received a national security transition brief. In response to discussion of possible need for U.S. intervention in Laos, Rusk "expressed the opinion that war in Laos would result in a larger affair than Korea."<sup>24</sup>

**January 19**: In a national security transition briefing the day before the inauguration, President Eisenhower and his senior staff spent considerable time discussing the situation in Laos with John Kennedy and three cabinet designates, including Secretary Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. The participants addressed possible U.S. intervention in Laos if the Laotian government invoked SEATO protection. Kennedy administration official George W. Ball, who was not at the meeting but heard much about it, recalled that Eisenhower's deep concern about the situation in Laos caught Kennedy off guard and "made a very big impact." The outgoing president did not discuss the situation in Vietnam at all. Ball described Vietnam as "very much of a peripheral

24. FRUS 1961-63, 24:14.

interest." As Secretary Rusk later put it, "Laos at that time was where most of the action was."  $^{25}$ 

At some point between the November 1960 election and his inauguration, Kennedy told speechwriter and confidant Theodore C. "Ted" Sorensen that "whatever's going to happen in Laos, an American invasion, a communist victory, or whatever, I wish it would happen before we take over and get blamed for it."<sup>26</sup>

**January 20**: In his inaugural address, President Kennedy strongly reiterated the Truman Doctrine, declaring that the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."<sup>27</sup>

**January 21**: On his first day in office, the new secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, summoned General Lansdale to give him a ten-minute briefing on Vietnam. Lansdale brought with him a small collection of crude insurgent weapons he intended to donate to the Special Forces training center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He recalled telling McNamara that "the enemy is licking our side" because in Vietnam, "the struggle goes far beyond the material things of life. It doesn't take weapons and uniforms and lots of food to win. It takes something else, ideas and ideals, and these guys are using that something else." Lansdale got the sense that McNamara did not understand him, that he thought Lansdale was "too unconventional."<sup>28</sup>

McNamara wrote years later in his 1995 memoir that Lansdale was actually the only person he found in government service who had any practical experience in Southeast Asia and with counterinsurgency,

25. For details of the meeting and of the subsequent controversy over exactly what Eisenhower advised Kennedy about potential intervention in Laos, see Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History* 79 (Sept. 1992): 568–87. See also *FRUS* 1961–63, 24:12–25; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 1–3. Ball quotes from Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 62; Rusk quote from D. Dean Rusk, interview with Thomas J. Schoenbaum and Richard B. Rusk, September 11, 1984, p. 2, Dean Rusk Oral History Collection, University of Georgia Libraries, http://russellibrarydocs.libs.uga. edu/Rusk\_OH\_C.pdf. Kennedy later stated publicly that he and Eisenhower spent more time on Laos at this meeting "than on any other thing." *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy*, 1961 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), 213 (hereafter *Public Papers* [date]), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/potpus/4730886.1961.001.

26. Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 640. Sorsensen wrote (p. 640) that Laos consumed more of the new administration's time during the first two months in office than any other issue.

27. Public Papers, 1961, 1.

28. Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 363–65; Currey, *Lansdale*, 1–2. Both authors quote the same Lansdale interview and indicate that the meeting with McNamara took place on his first day in office. Since January 21, the date on which McNamara was sworn in, was a Saturday, it is possible this encounter took place on Monday, January 23. Historian Jonathan Nashel observed that with McNamara, Lansdale "misjudged his audience—a mistake he rarely made." Nashel, *Lansdale's Cold War*, 86–87.

but he said the USAF officer was "relatively junior and lacked broad geopolitical expertise." Lansdale gained a more enthusiastic champion in his new supervisor, Roswell L. Gilpatric, McNamara's deputy secretary of defense. Gilpatric found that Lansdale "was not in favor" at the time the new administration took office, "with either the military or with the State Department." Gilpatric became "convinced they were wrong. I was convinced he was not a wheeler-dealer; he was not an irresponsible swashbuckler." He did note that Lansdale was "an unusual military type in that he was completely uninhibited in dealing with politicians and civilians." While many in the Pentagon regarded Lansdale as the resident expert on counterinsurgency, Gilpatric found that in practice, Lansdale was more "fascinated by the political scene" in Vietnam and less interested in the tactics and techniques needed to confront guerrillas in the field. His friendships with MAAG commanders Williams and McGarr also left him in a position where he rarely criticized how poorly the MAAG had trained and organized the ARVN to meet the insurgent threat.29

As for McNamara's view of counterinsurgency, Gilpatric said in a 1970 interview that "I think initially he, like myself—we were really agnostic in this area." They tended to follow the guidance of senior military leaders, who "weren't exactly forthcoming about laying any problems or matters in this area before the civilians. They felt this was within their province, and so we really got more stimulation from outside the Pentagon—principally from the White House—than we did from our own establishment, our own military organization." Indicative of the military leadership's antipathy toward counterinsurgency, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, USA (Ret.), who became President Kennedy's senior military advisor and ultimately his chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (*see July 1*), recalled that when the new president asked him about the Army's ability to develop capacity in low-intensity conflict, he replied that "we good soldiers are trained for all kinds of things. We don't worry about special situations." That answer, Taylor said, "didn't satisfy him a nickel's worth."<sup>30</sup>

**January 23**: During the first meeting of the new national security team on the topic of Laos, President Kennedy stated that he "did not see how the United States could solve the problem alone" and "wondered specifically

<sup>29.</sup> Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 32 (1st quote); Roswell L. Gilpatric, interview with Dennis J. O'Brien, May 5, 10, June 30, August 12, 1970, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 8–9 (2d–4th quotes), 36 (5th quote), https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/archives/JFKOH/Gilpatric%2C%20 Roswell%20L/JFKOH-RLG-01/JFKOH-RLG-01-TR.pdf (hereafter Gilpatric interview).

<sup>30.</sup> Gilpatric interview, 36; Taylor quoted in Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 32.
how the United States could save Laos." Kennedy "expressed concern at the weakness of the local situation in Laos." Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, USA, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that he did not consider that "Laos was lost." Secretary of State Rusk wondered whether Laos could be "kept in a state of flux, as opposed to deterioration," with support of the royal government.<sup>31</sup>

A report presented at the meeting said that the situation in Laos was "deteriorating progressively." The document was the product of an interagency working group on Laos that had met for the first time over the weekend following the inauguration. One of the group's recommendations was to augment airlift support, using either "contract" (Air America) or USAF aircraft.<sup>32</sup>

**January 25**: In a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, President Kennedy "said he is all for doing what we can in Laos," according to a memorandum of conversation. The president did "not want to start any form of action where the other side can easily top us in anything we do, however." Kennedy said that he "regarded the step of committing American troops as the last step to be employed." However, he was "determined to try by all means to sustain the government." General Lemnitzer said that the Joint Chiefs "have not been advocating the establishment of major U.S. forces in Laos, but rather the support of indigenous forces." The president requested a memorandum from the service chiefs laying out what U.S. troops could accomplish in Laos over a thirty-day period if intervention proved necessary (*see Feb. 6*). He also quizzed Gen. Thomas White, USAF chief of staff, on airlift capability and questioned why there were no jet transports in the fleet.<sup>33</sup>

**January 26**: President Kennedy's deputy national security advisor, Walt W. Rostow, had the president read General Lansdale's Vietnam trip report (*see Jan. 2–14*). Kennedy wanted Rostow to summarize it, but Rostow insisted that he read all of it. According to Rostow, the president looked up in the midst of the report and said, "That's the worst one we've got, isn't it?" Kennedy added that Eisenhower "never mentioned the word 'Vietnam' to me" (*see Jan. 19*). Rostow recalled that when the president "read the picture of the beginnings of infiltration, the revival of the war again, [he realized] that this would be the worst one." Kennedy's military

<sup>31.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:26–27 (quotes); William J. Rust, So Much to Lose: John F. Kennedy and American Policy in Laos (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 15.

<sup>32.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:28-40 (1st quote, 28; 2d quote, 35); Rust, So Much to Lose, 15.

<sup>33.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:43-44.



Roswell L. Gilpatric, the deputy secretary of defense, and Walt W. Rostow, the deputy national security advisor, emerged as two key figures early in the Kennedy administration regarding Vietnam policy. Gilpatric ran the interagency Vietnam task force in the spring, supervised General Lansdale and his Office of Special Operations, and in the fall was the point person for consideration of the operation that became Ranch Hand. Rostow was the president's closest advisor on Vietnam until Maxwell D. Taylor joined the staff in July 1961, and those two led a consequential fact-finding review mission to Vietnam in October. *Kennedy Library*.

advisor, Maxwell Taylor, said that Lansdale's report "rather shook up the White House."<sup>34</sup>

**January 28**: President Kennedy had Secretary McNamara call General Lansdale to the White House to participate in a high-level meeting about Southeast Asia. This encounter was the first time Kennedy met Lansdale.

34. Walt W. Rostow, interview with Paige E. Mulhollan, March 21, 1969, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 38 (Rostow quotes), http://www.lbjlibrary.net/assets/documents/archives/oral\_histories/rostow/rostow1.pdf; Rostow, interview with Richard Neustadt, April 11, 1964, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 44, https://archive2.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Rostow,%20Walt%20W/ JFKOH-WWR-01/JFKOH-WWR-01-TR.pdf (hereafter Rostow interview [1964]); Maxwell D. Taylor, interview with Ted Gittinger, June 1, 1981, transcript, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 6 (Taylor quote; hereafter Taylor interview), http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/taylor\_maxwell\_1981\_0601. pdf. Rostow said in the 1964 interview that he met with Kennedy on January 26 and February 2. He thought the president read Lansdale's report on February 2, but this encounter had to have happened before the January 28 meeting. See Lawrence S. Kaplan, Ronald D. Landa, and Edward J. Drea, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense*, Vol. 5: *The McNamara Ascendancy*, *1961–1965* (Washington, DC: Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2006), 35–36, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/secretaryofdefense/OSDSeries\_Vol5.pdf. Rostow also dated the time he gave the report to Kennedy as February 2 in his memoir. W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 264–65.



Secretary of State Rusk, President Kennedy, and Secretary of Defense McNamara in January 1961. Although McNamara is remembered for his deep involvement with Vietnam, that engagement did not grow until late in 1961. *Kennedy Library.* 

According to Walt Rostow's notes, the new president thanked Lansdale for his trip report and said that it "gave him a sense of the danger and urgency of the problem in Vietnam" (see Jan. 26). Graham Parsons, the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, introduced for discussion the counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam (see Jan. 4). The president questioned why an ARVN increase from 150,000 to 170,000 troops (see Sept. 1, 6, 1960) was necessary if insurgent forces opposing it numbered only 10,000. He also asked how the additional 20,000 men would be of any help in the current crisis since it would take a year or two to train them. Kennedy wondered whether the situation was "basically one of politics and morale." Parsons replied that "it was the judgment of the people out there that this plan would be useful," noting that the ARVN saw its primary task as confronting the 300,000-man North Vietnamese army. CIA director Allen Dulles said the MAAG shared this view and had "no adequate provision for para-military forces." These points perplexed Kennedy, who a week later sent a memorandum to General Lemnitzer asking for ideas on how the United States could advise South Vietnam to redistribute its troops "more effectively in order to increase the effectiveness of antiguerrilla activities." Despite his reservations, however, on January 30, Kennedy authorized \$28.4 million to fund ARVN expansion by 20,000 and \$12.7 million for training the Civil Guard. Kennedy also approved an interagency task force on Vietnam to study the broader provisions of the counterinsurgency plan.<sup>35</sup>

As the January 28 meeting progressed, Kennedy went even further than seeking counterinsurgent efforts in the south, stating that he also wanted U.S.-trained guerrilla forces operating in North Vietnam. CIA official William V. Broe said that "thus far, the Vietnamese government had not been very receptive to this program." Lansdale had initiated the only previous larger-scale northern infiltration/stay-behind effort in 1954– 55, which had ended disastrously for South Vietnamese personnel inserted in the Hanoi-Haiphong area by the CIA. At the time of this January 1961 meeting, the CIA station in Saigon was just beginning to put together a plan to airdrop South Vietnamese agents among northern highland tribes (*see Mar. 9, May 27–28*).<sup>36</sup>

The president had Lansdale speak about his recent trip "at some length," according to the memorandum of conversation. Lansdale said he favored the proposed 20.000-man increase, as it might free veteran ARVN troops for counter-guerrilla operations. As for the counterinsurgency document as a whole, he reported that "Diem's view was that some parts of the American plan made sense, [while] others would be very difficult." Lansdale said he found that the MAAG's relationship with Diem was "excellent" and its spirit was "constructive," in contrast to the U.S. embassy in Saigon, where foreign service personnel were "defeatist and not as interested as they should be." Kennedy asked Lansdale for his estimate of the general prospects in Vietnam. He replied that "the communists regard 1961 as their big year." Lansdale thought that with "a maximum American effort," the South Vietnamese could frustrate North Vietnamese aggression in 1961 and "move over into the offensive in 1962." Building South Vietnamese morale was important, in Lansdale's view, so they would "be moved to act with vigor and confidence." His opinion was that Diem remained the best leadership option but noted that "Diem must be persuaded to let the opposition coalesce in some legitimate form rather than concentrate on the task of killing him." Lansdale also observed that if

<sup>35.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:14–18 (1st–2d quotes, 17; 3d quote, 14; 4th quote, 18), 29 (5th quote); U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:13; Currey, Lansdale, 226; Lansdale interview (1970), 1–2, 106. For Kennedy's interest in counterinsurgency, and in Lansdale's report, see Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 341.

<sup>36.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:16–17; Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andradé, Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 3–15, 32–33.

Laos fell to the communists, it would become even harder to turn around South Vietnamese morale and will.<sup>37</sup>

Secretary Rusk explained the "extremely frustrating task" the diplomatic corps in Saigon faced in trying to press Diem to make reforms "he did not wish to do" while also attempting to convey unstinting U.S. support (*see Dec. 31, 1960*). Rusk said Ambassador Durbrow had "energetically and effectively" undertaken this task but that "it was now time for a change and he should be relieved in the near future."<sup>38</sup>

According to Lansdale, Kennedy turned to him and said, "Did Dean [Rusk] tell you I want you to be the ambassador to Vietnam?" State Department officials were horrified by this prospect, with Parsons telling Rusk after the meeting that Lansdale was a "lone wolf," an "operator," "flamboyant," and "not a team player." An intense debate about the prospective nomination ensued over the following weeks. Lansdale had his champions, including Rostow and Gilpatric, but pushback against Lansdale from the State Department was so great that Rusk threatened to resign if Kennedy appointed Lansdale. Others, including William Colby of the CIA and Roger Hilsman Jr. at State, thought the Pentagon did more to derail the nomination than the State Department.<sup>39</sup>

As an alternative, Kennedy proposed to the Joint Chiefs that Lansdale be advanced two ranks to lieutenant general and made chief of the MAAG in Vietnam, where he could oversee counterinsurgency efforts. The Joint Chiefs balked at the idea, with some blaming Lansdale for instigating the

37. *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:14 (1st, 3d–5th quotes), 17 (2d, 6th–10th quotes), 18. In response to some of Lansdale's suggestions, Ambassador Durbrow told the State Department he had "considerable reservation" about the potential to establish a viable opposition party in the near future and did not think the United States should press that issue before the April elections. He added that "the Vietnamese people lack the necessary sophistication and understanding, as well as the necessary sense of political responsibility, to make a two-party democratic system work at this time." Ibid., 26–27.

38. Ibid., 1:15 (3d–4th quotes), 18 (1st–2d quotes).

39. Lansdale interview (1970), 105-10 (Lansdale quote, 106); FRUS 1961-63, 1:19 (Parsons quotes); Currey, Lansdale, 226-29; Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy (New York: Dell, 1964), 419, 439 n. 1. Neither of the two sets of meeting notes in FRUS includes mention of Kennedy offering the ambassadorship to Lansdale at this meeting, but Lansdale gave similar versions of the story in his 1970 interview and in interviews with Currey in 1984. There are numerous mentions in other sources that Kennedy considered Lansdale for the post. See, for example, McGeorge Bundy, interview with William W. Moss, February 22, 1971, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 28-30 (hereafter Bundy interview), https://www.jfklibrary.org/ sites/default/files/archives/JFKOH/Bundy%2C%20McGeorge/JFKOH-MGB-03/JFKOH-MGB-03-TR.pdf. Rufus Phillips III, who served with Lansdale in Vietnam in the mid-1950s and had conversations with him about this situation in 1961, wrote that Lansdale's preference was not to be ambassador. According to Phillips, "What Lansdale initially had in mind was similar to his previous operational roles, dealing with the Vietnamese informally with a political mandate and the support of a wise ambassador," who he hoped would be his friend Kenneth T. Young Jr. When Lansdale realized that Young would not be the choice-Kennedy appointed him as ambassador to Thailand-Lansdale expressed willingness to accept the ambassadorship in Vietnam and even told some friends that his appointment was imminent. Rufus Phillips, Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 331 n. 8.

scheme. According to Lansdale, "Suddenly, my relations with the Chiefs went down to less than zero."  $^{\prime\prime40}$ 

With options for Lansdale meeting stiff opposition, Kennedy in mid-February chose Frederick E. Nolting Jr., a career diplomat with no experience in Asia, to be the next ambassador (*see May 10*). To oversee the counterinsurgency effort, Kennedy in mid-1961 appointed Maxwell Taylor as his senior military advisor after Taylor had served part time, unofficially, in that role since the beginning of the administration (*see July 1*). Taylor had retired as Army chief of staff in 1959 and took a much more conventional-force approach to irregular warfare than did Lansdale (*see Jan. 21*). According to one of Lansdale's biographers, Kennedy had "seized on the idea of counterinsurgency without really understanding it."<sup>41</sup>

Also on January 28, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia sent a letter to Kennedy in which he reiterated his call for a fourteen-nation conference on Laos (*see Jan. 1*).<sup>42</sup>

**January 28–30**: Against U.S. wishes, the Nationalist Chinese (Taiwan) moved 6,000–7,000 irregular troops into Laos by way of Burma. This force remained in Laos until mid-March. The belief among U.S. personnel in the region was that these men were in Laos to collect the opium poppy harvest.<sup>43</sup>

**January 30**: In his first address to Congress, President Kennedy noted that "in Asia, the relentless pressures of the Chinese Communists menace the

42. FRUS 1961-63, 23:146 n. 1.

43. Historical Division, Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Chronological Summary of Significant Events Concerning the Laotian Crisis, Second Installment: 1 February to 31 March 1961," May 19, 1961, 6, 18–19, 28, 53, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB342/doc01.PDF (hereafter Laos Chron. Summary); Toland interview, 60–61.

<sup>40.</sup> Currey, *Lansdale*, 228–29; Lansdale interview (1970), 110–11 (quote). Gen. Curtis E. LeMay confirmed to Lansdale that the Joint Chiefs thought Lansdale had proposed his own promotion.

<sup>41.</sup> Currey, Lansdale, 225-26 (quote), 229, 234; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 247; Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 341-43. The January 28 meeting was the peak of Lansdale's influence. Both Adamson and Colby credited Lansdale with convincing Kennedy that "winning Diem's cooperation was a matter of gaining his confidence in the U.S. officials with whom he dealt." Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 244 (quote); Colby, Lost Victory, 107-8. Currey (pp. 225-35), however, described how other members of the new administration started to isolate and exclude Lansdale from Vietnam discussions almost from the beginning. Taylor became the person to whom the president listened on military matters, including counterinsurgency, while Maj. Gen. Victor H. Krulak, USMC, came to advise the Joint Chiefs and Taylor on counterinsurgency in a manner very different from that advocated by Lansdale. See also Boot, Road Not Taken, 406; Gilpatric interview, 98–100. Military theorist Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. wrote of the men Kennedy chose to oversee his emphasis on counterinsurgency that "their lack expertise in the realm of lowintensity conflict hampered the ability of the administration to hold the Army's feet to the fire over counterinsurgency; thus, the Army could give lip service to requirements placed on it by the administration or ignore them entirely. The Army was not intentionally frustrating the formulation of national security policy but was, rather, acting out of its convictions that its first priority was in Europe and that if you could win a big war, you could certainly win a little one." Krepinevich, Army and Vietnam, 33. For a similarly negative view from the State Department of the Taylor/military conception of counterinsurgency, see Kattenburg, Vietnam Trauma, 107-12.

security of the entire area—from the borders of India and South Vietnam to the jungles of Laos, struggling to protect its newly won independence. We seek in Laos what we seek in all Asia, and, indeed, in all of the world—freedom for the people and independence for the government." During the same week, *Time* magazine opined that "for the new administration as well as the old," Laos "offers the unattractive choice between a difficult peace and an impossible war."<sup>44</sup>

Also on the 30th, General Lansdale wrote a long personal letter to Diem. He recounted the generally positive reception to his mission report in the upper echelons of government and told Diem that President Kennedy was "warmly interested and asked many questions." Lansdale added that "I am sure that you can count upon him as an understanding friend." Not everything was complimentary, however, as Lansdale noted that "there will be some here who will point out that much of the danger of your present situation comes about from your own actions." He recounted general criticisms and offered numerous prescriptions to address them. As he had observed in his meeting with Kennedy, one of Lansdale's greatest concerns was the growing political opposition to Diem. "There is much ugly talk and bad feeling among many people in Saigon," Lansdale wrote, to the point that he feared more coup attempts. He encouraged Diem to reach out to members of the opposition, particularly younger ones, and engage them with the message that "Vietnam stands to lose its freedom, that all Vietnamese must go to work now to save that freedom." Lansdale also reminded Diem that when he had been there in the mid-1950s. Diem had emphasized to him his "dream" that the new country have two strong political parties.45

**January 31**: Admiral Felt authorized General McGarr to detail U.S. military advisors in Vietnam down to the battalion headquarters level, and

44. *Public Papers*, 1961, 23; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 226. As senior CIA official Chester Cooper noted, "One curious aspect of Kennedy's remarks was the absence of any reference to the North Vietnamese, who, even more than the Chinese Communists, were causing the mischief in Laos and Vietnam." Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 171.

45. FRUS 1961–63, 1:20–24 (1st–3d quotes, 21; 4th quote, 22; 5th–6th quotes, 23). Lansdale had written in his trip report that "President Diem and I are friends. Also, he is a man who put other Vietnamese friends of mine in jail or exiled them. It is hardly a blind friendship." U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:7. After quoting extensively from this Lansdale letter, Nguyen Cao Ky mused many years after the war that "I have no inkling why Lansdale would write such a letter. An intelligence officer of his long experience should have known that even if Diem ever saw the letter, he would ignore any such pointed suggestions from his American allies. A better approach, one far more worthy of Lansdale's skills, would have been to pay a visit to Nhu. Lansdale could have attempted to persuade this counselor to the president to find a way to get his brother's attention. That would have been difficult; at this point in Diem's career, he seemed to think that he took instructions only from God, although he did sometimes listen to Nhu's advice." Ky, Buddha's Child, 82–83.

to command posts at lower levels when required. The MAAG was to take every precaution to keep from exposing U.S. personnel to risk of capture.<sup>46</sup>

On the same date, Ambassador Durbrow cabled the State Department in response to several suggestions General Lansdale had put forward to improve U.S. relations with South Vietnam (see Jan. 2–14, 28). Durbrow noted that because Diem would be running for reelection (see Apr. 9), a public message of support by President Kennedy before the canvass would give the impression that the United States was taking sides and "bringing undue influence in [the] electoral campaign." The ambassador also argued that such a statement would undermine the "considerable [U.S.] effort pressing Diem to adopt certain needed liberalizing reforms and changes in GVN methods and structure" (see Dec. 31, 1960). While he agreed with Lansdale that developing a viable two-party system in South Vietnam (see Jan. 30) should be a "long-range goal," Durbrow stressed that an attempt to press this issue at this time would only increase Diem's long-standing suspicion that elements in the U.S. mission were actively working against him (see Nov. 11–12, 1960; Jan. 28, 1961).<sup>47</sup>

Also on the 31st, the North Vietnamese politburo opened a fourweek meeting. This body, now under the leadership of Le Duan (see Sept. 1960), publicly acknowledged for the first time that war likely would be necessary to achieve the revolutionary goals in the south. The politburo's strategic directive developed during this session called for preparations for war but cautioned against an "explosion" of revolutionary activity, with a particular desire to "avoid a major armed intervention by the imperialists." North Vietnam did, however, begin shifting some of its military emphasis away from the defensive and toward preparation of more forces for action in the south. In a series of letters to southern leaders in February, Le Duan stressed that communist forces in the South were not yet at the strength, in terms of manpower and materiel, to successfully engage South Vietnam in full-scale warfare. Nevertheless, during the first half of 1961, insurgent fighters-officially the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) as of February 1961-killed an estimated 1,500 South Vietnamese troops and assassinated or kidnapped more than 2,000 national and local officials.<sup>48</sup>

**Late January**: Brig. Gen. Andrew J. Boyle, USA, succeeded Brig. Gen. John Heintges as commander of the ostensibly civilian PEO in Laos. In the same time frame, with operations in Laos increasing, Admiral Felt and Gen.

<sup>46.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:186.

<sup>47.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:26-27.

<sup>48.</sup> Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 92–95, 108 (1st quote, 93); Victory in Vietnam, 74–80 (2d quote, 75).

# Operations in Laos December 1960–January 1961



Emmett E. "Rosie" O'Donnell Jr., PACAF commander, sent Col. Harry S. Coleman, USAF, to Vientiane as senior air advisor, reporting directly to Felt. Coleman's primary tasks from CINCPAC were to establish a tactical operations center in Vientiane and lay the groundwork for Task Force 116 in the event it moved into Laos (*see Dec. 14, 30–31, 1960; Jan. 2, 7, Mar.* 



North American Aviation T–6 Texans in Laos in 1962. The United States provided ten of these aging aircraft, developed in 1935, to the Royal Lao Air Force by way of the Royal Thai Air Force in January 1961. Col. Harry S. Coleman, USAF, who served in Laos in 1961, never was sure the Lao T–6 pilots flew the missions they claimed to have flown. *Leary Collection, UT-Dallas.* 

21, 1961). He also was to track and coordinate all fixed-wing air operations in the country—those of the Royal Lao Air Force, Air America, and Major Aderholt's USAF detachment with the CIA that was flying from Thailand (*see Jan. 1960; Jan. 7, 1961*). Coleman, who deployed out of uniform as a GS-14, was not assigned to the Air Section of the PEO, but he assumed control of that unit after he and Boyle found it necessary to relieve the USAF lieutenant colonel who had been in command. Unlike the problems the Air Section in Saigon encountered with the Army-dominated MAAG there, Coleman and Boyle coordinated well and shared information.<sup>49</sup>

The military situation in Laos was "confused" when Boyle and Coleman arrived, according to Coleman, with the Royal Lao Army in control of everything, including the tiny air force. Coleman liked Phoumi, who he described as a "very sincere man," but the Laotian army and air force had almost no training, and staff officers cared more about gold braids and medals than they did military affairs, with little understanding of how to provide actual staff support. PEO officials told Coleman they had no way of confirming the size of Phoumi's army and thought it was significantly smaller than the Laotians reported, with the overstatement of strength and requests for expansion (*see Feb. 6*) for the purposes of

<sup>49.</sup> O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis (A Sequel)," 25–26; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 40; Coleman interview, 2–3, 9–10, 15, 26–27, 29, 37. Coleman did not coordinate helicopter operations, which were completely under Air America. Heintges apparently had not been well liked by U.S. personnel in Laos as Coleman (p. 58) reported hearing the general described as "a bit of a loser."

embezzling U.S. funds for the phantom troops. The United States provided thirty-seven cents per day for food for each Lao soldier, but U.S. officials believed that only about eight cents a day went for that purpose, with Phoumi and his senior staff sending the rest to Swiss bank accounts.<sup>50</sup>

Both Phoumi and the operational commander of the small air force, Maj. Thao Ma, were based in Savannakhet, hundreds of miles from Vientiane and the Plain of Jars. Coleman described Ma as a "born loser" who was just as political as Phoumi. Ma disliked the American PEO personnel with whom he worked and would not even talk to the Air Section chief who Coleman ultimately had to relieve. Coleman tried to change that culture and improve communication and training.<sup>51</sup>

Coleman was dismayed at the state of the airfields and support facilities in Laos (*see Jan.*) and endeavored to improve them as best he could with limited resources. He got funding directly from Felt to replace the decaying perforated steel planking (PSP) at Wattay airport in Vientiane and to extend the runway by 1,000 feet. He also installed a legitimate beacon to replace the twenty-five-watt nondirectional one. Coleman got a new runway built at Savannakhet, and he and his USAF PEO colleagues constructed a hangar and machine shop. He noted in a 1974 interview that "every bit of this we stole," as he "had no money that I could spend. So we purloined it at night and other places from the Army."<sup>52</sup>

Boyle and Coleman began advocating almost immediately after their arrival, with Felt's concurrence, that the newly installed Kennedy administration remove the restrictions on which Ambassador Brown and the State Department had insisted that kept the Royal Lao Air Force from using bombs and napalm against the Pathet Lao (see Mar. 13). While Secretary Rusk and Brown held firm against larger ordnance, Coleman did get the ambassador's approval to use a stockpile of 200-pound bombs he found at Wattay airport. Coleman and USAF personnel from the PEO testrigged this ordnance to a T-6 to see if it could be done. When Coleman proved that the bombs could be carried and deployed, he and Boyle took the suggestion to Brown. After a contentious country team discussion of the subject, the ambassador had Coleman and Boyle remain after he dismissed the other attendees. "Harry, I'm going to sanction the use of the bombs," Coleman recalled Brown saying, noting that he "almost fell dead" in surprise at the ambassador's decision. Brown made Coleman promise to be "very cautious in how you use them" and assure that the Lao pilots knew what they were doing. While Brown did allow this limited

51. Ibid., 37 (quote), 44-45.

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<sup>50.</sup> Coleman interview, 8 (1st quote), 12-15, 33, 47 (2d quote), 48-50.

<sup>52.</sup> Ibid., 38 (quotes), 54–56. Whether Coleman's reference was to the the Royal Lao Army or the U.S. Army is unclear, but more likely the former.

show of force by the Laotians, he and the State Department continued to resist calls for more organized bombing missions by Major Aderholt's B–26s, as well as Coleman's suggestions of dropping napalm on Pathet Laos forces on the Plain of Jars (*see Mar. 13, Apr. 15–17, 23, 26*). At the end of April as the parties involved were attempting to arrange a cease-fire, Brown vigorously opposed bombing by the Lao T–6s (*see Apr. 29*).<sup>53</sup>

Coleman found that serving in Laos was difficult for the small contingents of U.S. personnel, particularly in Savannakhet, where it was "hot, miserable, and [there was] nothing to do." The isolation affected everyone, with one major going "completely berserk" and having to be sent home under guard. Even in Vientiane, where living conditions were better in comparison, "a couple of officers cracked up."<sup>54</sup>

**February 1**: At an NSC meeting, President Kennedy instructed Secretary McNamara to place more emphasis on the development of counterguerrilla forces.<sup>55</sup>

February 2: The president's task force on Laos circulated a draft proposal on the potential for the neutralization of Laos. The administration seized on this concept, which Ambassador Brown had originally suggested, and began advocating for it through diplomatic channels. The idea was for a "neutral nations" conference of quasi-unaligned countries in Southeast Asia to construct a coalition government in Laos that would be acceptable to all sides and the world powers. The United States identified Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, who was close to Souvanna Phouma and was giving him sanctuary, as a potential leader for the summit, which would also include the Burmese and the Malayans. The concept percolated for a couple of weeks but fell apart when Sihanouk indicated on February 21 that he and Cambodia would not participate (see Feb. 20). The Soviets also opposed the neutral nations approach and by mid-month began pushing more aggressively for an international conference on Laos, which Sihanouk had proposed in January (see Jan. 1). The United States, which did not want outside communist participation, only came to begrudging acceptance of such a summit well into March, by which time the anticommunist forces in Laos were on the defensive (see Mar. 21).56

53. Ibid., 24–25 (quotes), 59; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 40. Coleman (p. 25) said that whether the 200-pound bombs "had any material effect, I couldn't say, because I am not sure where they were dropped." It is also unclear whether Brown informed the State Department of their use.

<sup>54.</sup> Coleman interview, 69-71.

<sup>55.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:17.

<sup>56.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 2–26; Brown interview, 17–19; Walt W. Rostow, "Evolution of Our Policy in Laos," March 9, 1961, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB342/doc04.PDF. Brown (p. 18) said they thought Sihanouk might be willing to moderate such a conference since he was "vain as a peacock."



President Kennedy meeting with Winthrop G. Brown, U.S. ambassador to Laos, on February 3. Brown found that Kennedy was well briefed on Laos and asked "extraordinarily well-informed questions." *Kennedy Library*.

**February 3**: President Kennedy summoned Ambassador Brown, who had been called to Washington for consultation with the State Department, to brief him on Laos. Brown recalled that Kennedy asked him "extraordinarily well-informed questions." When the president encouraged him to speak frankly, the ambassador told him that Souvanna was the only man who could unify the country. Brown thought Phoumi was "greatly overrated," that he "wasn't all that good a general, and he was a poor politician." He thought it was "a terrible thing" that Phoumi had become the focal point of U.S. policy. The ambassador had a "very low opinion" of Phoumi's Royal Lao Army, which he called a "feeble lot." Brown described Prime Minister Boun Oum as a "Lao Falstaff" and Sisavang Vatthana, the Laotian king, as "a total zero," with no real power, who was totally behind Phoumi and did not like Souvanna. The ambassador said that U.S. officials had misjudged Kong Le, who Brown believed was "a patriot, not a communist."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57.</sup> Brown interview, 13–14 (quotes); Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 243. For Kennedy's similarly detailed understanding of what was happening in Vietnam, see Gerald S. Strober and Deborah H. Strober, "*Let Us Begin Anew*": *An Oral History of the Kennedy Presidency* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 405–6.

**February 4**: Phoumi's troops recaptured the critical junction of Routes 7 and 13 in Laos, allowing the Royal Lao Army to reestablish a ground connection between the administrative capital at Vientiane and the ceremonial one in Luang Prabang.<sup>59</sup>

**February 6**: In response to a request from President Kennedy for a statement of the capability of the United States to deploy forces to Laos (*see Jan. 25*), General Lemnitzer submitted a study from the Joint Chiefs titled "U.S. Air and Sea Lift, Readiness and Posture of Laos." The paper outlined a large-scale operation over thirty days, focused on securing Vientiane and the southern Laotian panhandle.<sup>60</sup>

State Department official William H. Sullivan, who later served as ambassador to Laos, recalled that soon after the inauguration, Kennedy had asked the Joint Chiefs for a study—probably this one—"of what would be necessary to stop the North Vietnamese from moving into Laos. They came back with a rather extensive paper saying, in effect, that it would take a lot, and probably in the long run they might have to use atomic weapons to keep the Chinese out." This report "troubled Kennedy very much," according to Sullivan, and led him, very early in his administration, "to the conclusion that the military ideas on Laos were totally out of whack."<sup>61</sup>

Also on the 6th, Phoumi's men began a two-pronged advance toward the Plain of Jars. After the element of his force that was moving from the south failed to dislodge a communist position on the southern edge of the Plain on the 7th, Phoumi, against U.S. advice, launched an airborne assault against the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces on the Plain of Jars. Without sufficient aerial resupply, the attack faltered, and the paratroopers had to fight their way out of the area. This failed mission effectively ended Phoumi's attempt at an offensive. Walt Rostow told President Kennedy by the end of the month that Phoumi's force was a "relatively weak reed for an offensive against determined and well-

<sup>58.</sup> Brown interview, 15-16.

<sup>59.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 6.

<sup>60.</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>61.</sup> Strober and Strober, "Let Us Begin Anew," 405.

armed opposition," and discussion soon turned toward more direct, albeit covert, U.S. intervention (*see Mar. 3*).<sup>62</sup>

Rostow later said that "the military grossly deluded the president as to what Phoumi's capabilities were" before this Plain of Jars operation. Senior CIA official Richard Bissell recalled an NSC meeting before Phoumi took the offensive where General Lemnitzer briefed Phoumi's plan. "I could not help but feel that it had very little likelihood of success," Bissell wrote. "In fact, it was impossible." Bissell had just returned from Vientiane and understood that the situation on the ground was "a million miles from the precision, order, and purposefulness of the Department of Defense." Bissell found the Joint Chiefs' expectations and the briefing "almost surreal."<sup>63</sup>

Rostow said in a 1964 interview that he "never saw a worse performance by our military" than with the advice its leaders gave Kennedy on Laos early in 1961. "They were wrong about the situation on the ground. They were wrong in the structure of their planning. They were wrong about communist logistical capabilities, which they grossly overstated."<sup>64</sup>

**February 8**: In addition to aiding Phoumi's regular army, the United States, by way of the CIA, was also supporting irregulars in Laos from the Hmong ethnic group, led by the charismatic Vang Pao. On this date, President Kennedy authorized the CIA to arm as many Hmong troops as Vang could recruit, although CIA headquarters capped the number at 5,000. Phoumi did not trust the Hmong, however, complicating U.S. hopes of coordinating their efforts.<sup>65</sup>

**February 9**: The Joint Chiefs informed Admiral Felt that the use of U.S. aircraft to airlift supplies directly to Vientiane was not approved, but that U.S. planes could fly to the airfield at Udorn, Thailand, less than fifty miles south of Vientiane. The service chiefs told Felt to have his staff

62. Laos Chron. Summary, 8; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 40–41; *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:62 (quote); Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 17. At the same time he had his troops advancing, Phoumi claimed to be forming new units. On February 1, Admiral Felt had sent the Joint Chiefs his concurrence on Phoumi's request for funds and equipment for four new battalions. General Boyle reported on the 6th that Phoumi was actually trying to form ten battalions, despite no U.S. provisions to support six of them. Boyle doubted that the Laotians could find capable leadership for so many units. Laos Chron. Summary, 1, 8, 31. The expansion request already had been sent up the chain of command before Boyle had arrived. He would have heard, as Colonel Coleman did, the suspicion among Americans in the PEO that the Lao military leadership was embezzling U.S. funding for troops (*see Late Jan.*).

63. Rostow interview (1964), 46 (1st quote); Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 147. Ambassador Brown said that he had tried to convince General Lemnitzer that the Laotians "were not the best soldiers in the world," that "we were training the wrong kind of army with the wrong kind of people." Lemnitzer responded, "Well, we made good soldiers out of the Koreans. Why can't we make good soldiers out of the Laotians?" Brown interview, 8.

64. Rostow interview (1964), 46.

65. Ahern, Undercover Armies, 45, 51.



Even as the United States committed to aiding groups like the Hmong in Laos, getting supplies to them was problematic. The area at the bottom left was the landing strip/drop zone for this mountaintop Hmong village. Maj. Harry "Heinie" Aderholt and his USAF detachment detailed to the CIA flew these missions, as did civilian Air America pilots, mostly in U–10 Helio Couriers. USAF.

investigate the operability of the Udorn field and estimate improvements that would be needed to support airlift staging. Initial reports were unpromising (*see Feb. 28*).<sup>66</sup>

**February 10**: The British expressed their opinion to Secretary Rusk that the Boun Oum government in Laos would be unacceptable to the communists and the neutralists, and that any solution there probably would have to include Souvanna. According to Ambassador Brown, the British and the French "both strongly supported Souvanna and strongly supported neutrality."

66. Laos Chron. Summary, 10.



The first munitions drop at the Hmong village of Ban Pa Dong, Laos, in late January was a festive occasion. The local clan leader, the "naikhong," was in full uniform, and the women wore their holiday outfits. Ahern, *Undercover Armies*.

Brown said that Washington saw Souvanna as "gullible" and "subject to communist influence," if not outright "procommunist." Brown thought more favorably of him but also conceded in retrospect that Souvanna had a "very strong tendency to think that he could accomplish a hell of a lot more than he was in fact able to accomplish. He indulged in a great deal of wishful thinking," particularly in relation to the influence he believed he could have over the Pathet Lao.<sup>67</sup>

**February 13**: Ambassador Durbrow and General McGarr presented the counterinsurgency plan for Vietnam (*see Jan. 4, 28*) to Diem. Although President Kennedy had approved ARVN expansion by 20,000 troops, the United States expected South Vietnam to pay the additional personnel, and Secretary Rusk told Durbrow to convey to Diem that funding beyond fiscal-year 1961 was contingent upon South Vietnamese compliance with the military, political, and economic reforms outlined in the document. "Diem's reaction was cool," according to McGarr, with conversation centered on Diem's concern about how his government could afford the expansion. Over the following weeks, Diem began implementing some

<sup>67.</sup> Ibid., 11; Brown interview, 3, 8, 19 (quotes).

of the military components of the plan but continued his pattern of delay with political and economic reforms, to Durbrow's consternation (*see Apr. 11*). Recruitment lagged as well, as Diem dickered for months with the United States over pay for the enlarged force and did not formally approve induction until after Durbrow left Saigon in early May. The United States finally promised funding for the additional 20,000 troops during that month (*see May 20*), but little actual expansion started until the summer, by which time Diem was requesting even more men (*see June 9, 14*).<sup>68</sup>

Even though the Diem administration's efforts at implementing the concepts of the counterinsurgency plan were sporadic, the document remained the basis for ongoing U.S. planning for South Vietnam, with several of the details rolled into a National Security Action Memorandum in the spring (*see May 11*), which General Lansdale had a direct hand in shaping (*see Apr. 20*).<sup>69</sup>

**February 16**: In response to a query from the president, the Joint Chiefs submitted an estimate of how many communist forces could be introduced into Laos within thirty days. Their figures for ground troops were fifteen North Vietnamese divisions (105,000 men), eight Chinese divisions (48,000), and three Chinese paratroop battalions (3,000) for a total of 156,000 men. For air forces, the Joint Staff posited that China could provide 340 jet fighters and 125 jet light bombers for a total of 465 aircraft.<sup>70</sup>

**February 20**: In a carefully crafted reply to Prince Sihanouk's letter of January 28 (*see Jan. 28*), President Kennedy expressed U.S. concern that an international conference on Laos like Sihanouk had proposed "would increase international tensions, rather than reduce them, and thus seriously impede and delay effective measures to relieve the situation in Laos." Kennedy did encourage Sihanouk to consider heading a neutral nations commission to police any potential agreement. The U.S. administration continued to hold out hope that Sihanouk would chair a neutral nations conference on Laos that would exclude the international powers, and thus the Soviet Union and China. Sihanouk made public the next day his refusal to head a conference or a commission and wrote Kennedy to that effect on February 24 (*see Feb. 2*).<sup>71</sup>

<sup>68.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:31–32, 350–51 (quote, 350); *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 11:14–16; Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 150–54; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles," 244–45; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 170. In a briefing for senior British embassy officials in Washington a week later, the State Department's Vietnam desk officer explained that "in addition to requiring a great deal of cooperation on both sides," the counterinsurgency plan "would also cost the Vietnamese a good deal of their own money. We felt that their economy was capable of meeting these additional expenses. President Diem had not been sure of this when the plan was explained to him." *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:36.

<sup>69.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:170.

<sup>70.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 11.

<sup>71.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 23:145-46.

**February 23**: General Boyle advised Admiral Felt that Air America did not have the personnel to operate twenty H–34 helicopters authorized to be sent for operations over Laos in addition to the four the company already had (*see Jan. 7*). Boyle suggested that a U.S. military unit be deployed to support the requirement, out of uniform, an idea that the Pentagon incorporated into planning for what became Operation Millpond (*see Mar. 21–23*).<sup>72</sup>

On the same date, President Kennedy met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While responding to the president's question of whether U.S. troops could help with training South Vietnamese forces in counterinsurgency tactics, Gen. George H. Decker, the Army chief of staff, told the president that there were only three men attached to the MAAG who were "skilled in guerrilla operations." Gen. David M. Shoup, USMC commandant, said that the Marines could carry out their own operations in such a manner but "preferred not to train other people." Kennedy forcefully disagreed, telling his most senior officers that "it is not always possible for us to take direct action." He added that "for most of the problems that face us now, we will have to satisfy ourselves with training the people of these various countries to do their own guerrilla and anti-guerrilla operations."<sup>73</sup>

Also on the 23d, the director for intelligence on the Joint Staff, Maj. Gen. Robert A. Breitweiser, USAF, submitted to Secretary McNamara a document titled "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain U.S. Courses of Action in Laos." The authors did not believe that the Soviets would attempt to match U.S. actions in a corresponding manner, "except possibly in the case of more extreme U.S. military measures." More overt U.S. intervention might be met by Soviet support of direct North Vietnamese involvement and possibly acceptance of Chinese participation. Rare among documents and discussions in this time frame, this study made very limited mention of the possibility of Chinese intervention. Its focus was on the Soviets, who were directly engaged in supporting the Pathet Lao. China had only limited involvement in Laos at this time (*see Dec. 13, 1960*).<sup>74</sup>

**February 26**: To bolster Phoumi's efforts to retake the Plain of Jars, Admiral Felt suggested to the Joint Chiefs that the B–26s under Major Aderholt's command at Takhli, Thailand (*see Jan. 7*), attack convoys and supply dumps in the Plain of Jars area and that more aircraft be supplied through Air America. Felt also noted that "U.S. volunteers" could be sent to fly AD–6s against any potential communist propeller-driven fighters over central Laos.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 27.

<sup>73.</sup> Jack Shulimson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam*, 1960–1968, Part 1 (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 38–39, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/ History/Vietnam/Vietnam\_1960-1968\_P001.pdf.

<sup>74.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:59-61 (quote, 59).

<sup>75.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 28.



The airfield at Udorn, Thailand (*upper left*), during the rains of later spring 1961. On February 28, Walt Rostow told President Kennedy he had been informed that this base, about fifty miles south of Vientiane, was "not of much use," but the USAF was ferrying Marines there three weeks later. Hofmann, *Operation Millpond*.

**February 27**: Ambassador Brown cabled Secretary Rusk that at present, Laos was a "one-man (Phoumi) government." He cautioned that if Phoumi spent the amount of time "mending his political fences" that some in Washington thought he should, the war effort would suffer. Brown advised that Phoumi should be "told in unmistakable terms" that his focus should be on retaking the Plain of Jars, so his government could negotiate from a position of strength. In his reply, Rusk concurred that the military front needed to be a priority, but he also thought Brown should encourage Phoumi to reorganize the government in a manner that would free Phoumi to concentrate on the Pathet Lao.<sup>76</sup>

**February 28**: Walt Rostow told President Kennedy he had been informed that the airfield at Udorn, Thailand, was "not of much use" (*see Feb. 9*) and noted that the president might soon be getting questions about flying U.S. aid directly into Vientiane. (The Joint Chiefs gave Admiral Felt formal authorization for direct flights on March 14.) Rostow also observed that the Air America contract had proven to be "a very expensive operation." As for potential offensive missions, he told Kennedy that the Pentagon was trying to get better intelligence to determine if the Pathet Lao, through the Soviet airlift, had accumulated "targetable" ammunition dumps that the United States might be able to attack with "volunteer pilots."<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:62 (quotes); Laos Chron. Summary, 32.

<sup>77.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:62 (quotes); Laos Chron. Summary, 48. Rostow's note was a debrief for the president on the Laos task force meeting from February 27.



**March**: In Vietnam, the only combat-ready VNAF fighter squadron increased its sorties in March to 120, up from 40 the previous month.<sup>78</sup>

In Thailand, the United States sent an extensive contingent to a SEATO air training exercise, Air Bull (March 1–5). Almost 600 USAF personnel participated, and the aircraft complement included F–100s, F–102s, RF–101s, B–57s, and supporting tankers and cargo planes. A week after this show of strength and allied commitment in the region, SEATO staged a ground-oriented exercise, Rajata (Wave). Although Air Bull coincided with the ramping up of U.S. activities in Laos, it had been planned for six months.<sup>79</sup>

**March 1**: Secretary Rusk cabled the embassy in Saigon that the "White House ranks [the] defense [of] Vietnam among [the] highest priorities [of] U.S. foreign policy. Having approved [the] Counterinsurgency Plan, [the] president [is] concerned whether Vietnam can resist Communist pressure during [the] 18–24 month period before [the] Plan takes full effect." The State Department offered a list of suggestions for hastening South Vietnam's counter-guerrilla activities, prompting a series of sharp responses from General McGarr. He wrote the Pentagon that the State Department directive "would be counterproductive in that it will confuse and will retard the offensive of the Government of Vietnam against the Viet Cong which is finally getting underway." The White House wanted more aggressive action, though, and soon put the order in writing for Secretary McNamara (*see Mar. 9*).<sup>80</sup>

**March 3**: President Kennedy told the Joint Chiefs to prepare a plan to take the Plain of Jars from the Pathet Lao, without acknowledged U.S. involvement, and to call Admiral Felt and General Boyle to Washington for consultations on the endeavor (*see Mar. 9*).<sup>81</sup>

The reasons the administration made the decision to outline a more aggressive move in Laos at this time, potentially with U.S. troops, are difficult to discern from surviving documents. Phoumi's men had not yet been driven to the defensive (*see Mar. 6*). Walt Rostow had reported to the president on February 28 that "Phoumi is stuck," but the U.S. military consensus was that "Phoumi's forces can hold even if they are unlikely to advance very far." On March 2, the Joint Chiefs had told Kennedy that the reluctance of SEATO nations to get involved militarily in Laos meant that the U.S. might eventually have to intervene unilaterally or as the majority

<sup>78.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 67. The VNAF squadron only had six AD–6s at this time (see May). Whether it was still flying some of the F–8Fs is unclear.

<sup>79.</sup> Glasser, Secret Vietnam War, 15-16.

<sup>80.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:40-44 (1st quote, 40; 2d quote, 43).

<sup>81.</sup> Ibid., 24:68, 72, 74; Laos Chron. Summary, 31-32; Rust, So Much to Lose, 16.

of a multinational force to keep Laos from falling to the communists. At the March 3 meeting, however, the focus was on taking the Plain of Jars offensive action—not concerns for defensive posture. Several members of the administration did believe that the noncommunist government in Laos would be negotiating from a position of considerable disadvantage if the communists held the Plain of Jars at the time of an international conference (*see Feb. 27*). A day after the March 3 meeting, British officials indicated their concern that the communists might advance in Laos in anticipation of such a conference.<sup>82</sup>

**March 6**: The Pathet Lao/Kong Le combined force began an offensive from its base on the Plain of Jars toward Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Early on the 7th, these troops drove Phoumi's men from the vital intersection of Routes 7 and 13 (*see Feb. 4*), with much of Phoumi's force breaking and running. Within a matter of days, Kong's men and the Pathet Lao wiped out the gains Phoumi had made over the previous two months, prompting intensive debates in Washington over what should be done (*see Mar. 9, 13*). In the midst of this military crisis, Phoumi left on a diplomatic trip to Phnom Penh to confer with Souvanna (*see Mar. 10*). Rostow wrote in a memo for the president on the 9th that although Phoumi stated "his intention of regaining the road junction, the capabilities and morale of his forces are in question."<sup>83</sup>

**March 9**: President Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson met with senior military and national security advisors to consider the Pentagon's draft plan for Laos (*see Mar. 3*). Those present at the meeting also included Admiral Felt, General Boyle, and Col. John S. Wood Jr., USA, who was Phoumi's senior military advisor. The proposal called for air strikes by sixteen unmarked USAF B–26s against Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces and their supply dumps on the Plain of Jars, supported by H–34 helicopters that would transport anticommunist troops and harass the procommunist/neutralist foes. Phoumi's troops would be augmented in their effort to capture the Plain of Jars by Hmong tribesmen, to whom Major Aderholt and the CIA had been coordinating arms and aid deliveries on Air America-piloted light aircraft and H–34s (*see Feb. 8*). Aderholt

<sup>82.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:62 (quotes), 68–71; Laos Chron. Summary, 34–35, 45–46; Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 16. In a memorandum reviewing the March 3 meeting for the Laos task force, the author of the paper noted that "after considerable discussion, it was agreed that Defense should make recommendations as to what could be done on the ground to help our diplomatic action." *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:70.

<sup>83.</sup> Futrell Chron., 7; Laos Chron. Summary, 38–39; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 42; *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:71; Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 127; Rostow, "Evolution of Our Policy in Laos" (quote).



was to oversee the prospective B–26 missions and had four of the aircraft already at Takhli (*see Jan. 7*).<sup>84</sup>

The president rigorously questioned those present on military and diplomatic issues related to the proposed operations. He noted that the United States would need permission from Thailand for staging such an

84. FRUS 1961–63, 24:72–79; Rust, So Much to Lose, 16–17; Trest, Air Commando One, 108–9; Laos Chron. Summary, 51.

effort on its soil (*see Mar. 17*) and indicated that flights into Laos would have to be handled by "civilianized USAF personnel." He wondered whether all SEATO nations would need to be informed of the plans, or just Thailand. Kennedy asked what would be the "point of no return" if preparations started immediately. He was told April 1. Boyle raised the question of whether Phoumi would be able to hold the rest of Laos if the advance on the Plain of Jars failed, to which Felt responded that it would be "pretty tough because the Pathet Lao are all over the country." The president asked near the end of the meeting if there was any disagreement with the plan from those present. The notes recorded that "no one evidenced any." Kennedy told Secretary McNamara to formulate a plan of action but said he wanted to meet again before giving final approval to launch (*see Mar. 13*).<sup>85</sup>

Kennedy also learned at the meeting that despite concerns over the Soviet airlift to the Pathet Lao, "the U.S. has sent in much more tonnage since December 3 than the Soviets have." Nearly all these supplies had been flown to Bangkok and Takhli by the USAF and transported into Laos by Air America, with larger aircraft flying out of Bangkok and smaller ones from Takhli.<sup>86</sup>

Discussion ranged to what could be done in Vietnam as well. The administration had grown increasingly concerned that the South Vietnamese government was not stepping up its counterinsurgency efforts with enough urgency (*see Mar. 1*). After the March 9 meeting, Kennedy had McGeorge Bundy, his national security advisor, prepare a National Security Action Memorandum (NASM 28) that codified "the President's instruction that we make every possible effort to launch guerrilla operations in the Viet-Minh territory at the earliest possible time." The document ordered McNamara to "report to the President as soon as feasible your views on what actions might be undertaken in the near future and what steps might be taken to expand operations in the longer future" (*see Jan. 28, May 27–28*).<sup>87</sup>

March 10: After two days of meetings in Phnom Penh, Phoumi and Souvanna signed a joint communique, made public on the 11th, declaring

85. *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:72–79 (1st quote, 77; 2d quote, 78; 3d and 4th quotes, 79); Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 16–18. There are three versions of National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 29 that are dated March 9; all note that they were written after the national security meeting. The papers include identical seventeen-item, one-sentence actions that the president authorized at the meeting. Kennedy signed but did not date one of the copies, so it is unclear when he endorsed it. Several secondary sources indicate that the president did not give final approval for the plan until March 13. The three versions of NSAM 29 can be found through the National Security Archive: https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB342/. See also Laos Chron. Summary, 42–43.

86. FRUS 1961-63, 24:74 (quote); Trest, Air Commando One, 99-110, 116-20. According to one source, "Some fifteen Air America C-46s and C-47s lifted approximately one thousand tons [of supplies] monthly into Laos, principally from Bangkok." Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 441.

<sup>87.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:18.

that "strict neutrality and conventional neutralization" would be the basis for reestablishing peace and unity in Laos. While Souvanna was insistent on an international conference to reach final accords, Phoumi told Ambassador Brown after his talks with Souvanna that he believed he could stall and ultimately avoid such a summit, which the United States at that point still opposed (*see Feb. 2, Mar. 21*).<sup>88</sup>

On the same date, after meeting with Khrushchev, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow reported that the Soviet leader seemed convinced that the United States was "genuinely seeking" neutrality for Laos and was "intrigued by the possibility" of settling the issue. Khrushchev favored a fourteen-nation conference. He told the ambassador that the United States should not be concerned about Souvanna as a potential leader of a neutral government because Souvanna was not a communist and would probably chart an independent course like Sihanouk or Jawaharlal Nehru of India.<sup>89</sup>

**March 11**: The Joint Chiefs told Admiral Felt to prepare sixteen H–34 helicopters, and maintenance personnel to support them, for deployment to Thailand (*see Mar.* 21-23).<sup>90</sup>

**March 12**: Secretary McNamara informed Secretary Rusk, General Lemnitzer, and CIA director Allen Dulles that President Kennedy had authorized the redeployment of eight Asian-based Air America B–26 aircraft and crews to Thailand. The planes were ready to ship by the 15th. However, the majority of B–26s actually sent to Takhli came from the U.S. mainland; apparently, only four Air America B–26s were a part of the deployment (*see Mar. 30*).<sup>91</sup>

On the same date, Rusk cabled Ambassador Brown. He expressed concern that the communists in Laos would try to make a major military advance ahead of an international conference, as the Viet Minh had done at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Rusk told Brown to push for every level of military preparedness possible. He also wanted Brown to encourage Phoumi, Boun Oum, and King Sisavang Vatthana to consider a governmental reorganization that would be more acceptable to the international community, and that would not leave Souvanna able to stake a claim as head of state.<sup>92</sup>

Col. Harry Coleman, the senior air advisor in Laos, later said in an interview that Brown was in over his head when confronting the

<sup>88.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 43–45.

<sup>89.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:81-82 (quote); Laos Chron. Summary, 43, 49-50.

<sup>90.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 45.

<sup>91.</sup> Ibid., 46, 51; Leeker, "Air America in Laos III-In Combat," 4.

<sup>92.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 45-46.



Prince Souvanna Phouma was on his third stint as Laotian prime minister in 1960 when he was deposed in December. He would return to that office in July 1962 as part of the peace settlement and remain in that position until 1975. *Kennedy Library*.

increasingly difficult military situation. The ambassador did not know "anything about warfare, tactics, strategies, or anything else. I thought, personally, he was a very poor choice to have in the country."<sup>93</sup>

**March 13**: With the news from Laos worsening in the face of the Pathet Lao advance (*see Mar. 6*), President Kennedy approved the plan, which had been outlined during the discussion on the 9th (*see Mar. 9*), for a U.S.-supported attempt for anticommunist forces to retake the Plain of Jars. The effort became known as Operation Millpond (*see Mar. 21–23, Apr. 17–19*). The Pentagon already had alerted units in the Pacific to prepare for deployment before the president gave his final approval (*see Mar. 11*). The meeting on the 13th included discussion of what aircraft would be sent and who would fly and maintain them. The B–26s at Takhli were to be augmented by the USAF to a total of sixteen, to interdict Pathet Lao supply lines, dumps, and installations. Air America contractors would maintain

93. Coleman interview, 24.

the planes. Air America would also receive four C–130s, three DC–4s, and one C–47 to support the operations. Admiral Felt suggested that outof-uniform U.S. Marines could fly and maintain the H–34 helicopters, although Army and Navy pilots ended up flying as well.<sup>94</sup>

Debate over crews and support for the B–26s continued through the week. The USAF had the planes to supply from bases in Asia and the United States, but Major Aderholt only had four Air America crews qualified to fly them. The USAF estimated that training more civilian crews, or crews from SEATO allies, would take four to eight weeks. The alternative, which Kennedy approved, was to use USAF pilots, with all the airmen "sheep-dipped"—serving out of uniform and given non-USAF credentials and back stories (*see Mar.* 21–23).<sup>95</sup>

Even as the aircraft and crewmen prepared to depart, another significant issue remained: the State Department prohibition against the use of bombs and napalm in Laos (*see Late Jan.*). Secretary Rusk held fast on the subject, believing that the introduction of such ordnance would be considered an escalation of the conflict. He also argued that a small number of light bombers would do little to change the course of the conflict. Although the United States seemed prepared to waive these rules of engagement as conditions worsened in April (*see Apr. 15–17, 23, 26*), the order that forbade bombs and napalm in Laos remained in effect until 1963.<sup>96</sup>

**March 14–15**: Phoumi flew to Phnom Penh for another round of meetings with Souvanna, which went much worse than their talks a week earlier (*see Mar. 10*). Souvanna reported that he had been roundly criticized for their joint communique. At this second meeting, he insisted that an international conference on Laos would have to be the first step toward any solution. Souvanna also said that Souphanouvong and the Pathet Lao recognized him as the only true leader of Laos, but that Souphanouvong, his half-brother, had told him that he would be expected to follow Pathet Lao policy guidance. Ambassador Brown later stated that "Souvanna would never believe that his brother was a communist."<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 42; *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:86–88; Laos Chron. Summary, 47; Hofmann, *Operation Millpond*, 7. PACAF trained four Air America crews on C–130s in early April before these civilian crews deployed to Takhli with the aircraft. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 441; Laos Chron. Summary, 51.

<sup>95.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 43; Trest, Air Commando One, 111-12.

<sup>96.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 43; Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 127-28.

<sup>97.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 53; Brown interview, 12 (quote). Ambassador Durbrow had a very similar impression of the Souvanna-Souphanouvong relationship. When Durbow visited Souvanna in December 1957, the Laotian leader said of Souphanouvong that "'he's not a communist. Of course there are some communists in the Pathet Lao, but my half-brother is not a communist at all. He's just a Lao." Durbrow observed in 1970 that Souvanna "was just set on not believing the facts of life, [and] he damn near lost his country in the process." Durbrow interview, 96–97.

**March 17**: The U.S. ambassador in Bangkok reported that he had reached the necessary agreements with the Thai government for basing and operations out of Takhli for the B–26s and Udorn for the H–34s (*see Mar. 9, 13*). Marshal Sarit, the Thai prime minister, readily supported Phoumi, who was his cousin.<sup>98</sup>

Also on the 17th, the Joint Chiefs informed Secretary McNamara that the Air America B–26s were ready for deployment to Thailand, awaiting USAF crews (*see Mar. 12*).<sup>99</sup>

A *Time* magazine cover story of the same date described Laos as "landlocked, lackadaisical, and so primitive that the currently favored adjective 'underdeveloped' would be an unwarranted compliment." According to the author, Stanley A. Karnow, the Lao had "no zeal" and "no interest in fighting." Phoumi was the only "ambitious" Lao on the anticommunist side but had "trouble making his soldiers fight" and was "embarrassingly unable to win any battles."<sup>100</sup>

**March 18**: Secretary Rusk had a meeting with the Soviet foreign minister, Andrei A. Gromyko, that Rusk termed "quite negative." Although Gromyko told Rusk to tell President Kennedy that the Soviet Union "wants nothing" in Laos, he also said not to "underestimate" Soviet resolve. Rusk and Gromyko seemed to agree on the theoretical objective of a neutral and independent Laos, but Rusk found Gromyko "completely elusive" on any details, other than insistence on an international conference.<sup>101</sup>

On the same date, General Boyle reported that Phoumi was "rather desperate and cannot be persuaded to go on the offensive on any front. His concept now is to dig in and to hold what he has."<sup>102</sup>

**March 20**: President Kennedy met with senior national security advisors in an off-the-record discussion on Laos. The participants considered the option, supported particularly by Walt Rostow, of deploying a small USMC force into the Mekong valley as a show of U.S. support for the anticommunist government and to deter a Pathet Lao advance toward Vientiane. The president seemed reluctant to consider such a move. The Joint Chiefs countered that a foray by a small contingent might provoke North Vietnamese or Chinese intervention. Their view was that if the United States sent a force, it should be 60,000 men plus full air support.

<sup>98.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 54. For the additional assurances of U.S. support that Sarit sought, see *FRUS 1961–63*, 23:843–48.

<sup>99.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 54.

<sup>100.</sup> Stanley Karnow, "Laos: Test of U.S. Intentions," *Time*, March 17, 1961, 20–25; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 218–19.

<sup>101.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 54 (1st and 4th quotes); FRUS 1961-63, 24:94 (2d-3d quotes).

<sup>102.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 54.



Sikorsky H–34s at Udorn, Thailand, during Operation Millpond. Twenty flew out of that base for missions in Laos, which was less than fifty miles to the north. A USMC air base squadron deployed to Udorn to provide maintenance for the aircraft. Hofmann, *Operation Millpond.* 

Adm. Arleigh A. Burke, the Joint Chiefs' representative, also raised the possibility of using nuclear weapons.<sup>103</sup>

Although not mentioned in the brief accounts of this meeting and the one the next day, Kennedy shared the Joint Chiefs' concern about possible Chinese intervention in Laos. He referred to that threat in a conversation with Richard Nixon a month later, saying that it was one of the reasons he had been reluctant to send U.S. forces (*see Apr. 17–19*).<sup>104</sup>

Also on the 20th, the Joint Chiefs informed Admiral Felt that they considered it "basic to future operations" that Phoumi retake the junction of Routes 7 and 13 (*see Mar.* 6) and proceed with plans to capture the Plain of Jars. The service chiefs requested recommendations on personnel and materiel needed to support such operations. Felt replied that Phoumi's willingness to launch an attack and the capacity of his commanders to carry out the assault were larger issues than what additional hardware the Laotian forces might need. After the arrival of the Operation Millpond

103. FRUS 1961–63, 24:94–95; Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 332–33. At another meeting during this period when General Lemnitzer was present, State Department official Roger Hilsman recalled that someone asked the chairman whether the military could get U.S. troops into the Plain of Jars. "We can get them in all right," Lemnitzer said. "It's getting them out again that worries me." Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 128. Hilsman (pp. 128–30) discussed the military's determination, in light of the Korea experience, to "never again" fight a limited war, particularly in Asia. He also recorded Kennedy's concern that the leading elements of a U.S. ground force would be attacked before they were fully deployed and operational.

104. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 48 n. 70; Richard M. Nixon, "Cuba, Castro and John F. Kennedy," *Reader's Digest*, November 1964, 290–92, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP75-00149R000500440001-1.pdf.



A Douglas B–26 Invader at Takhli, Thailand, during the spring of 1961, with this particular aircraft outfitted for reconnaissance as an RB–26C. Newly promoted Lt. Col. Heinie Aderholt, detailed to the CIA, oversaw the operations of the B–26s at Takhli. *Leary Collection, UT-Dallas.* 

helicopters (*see Mar. 21–23*), Air America did stage a paradrop from Luang Prabang to carry Phoumi's troops to the Route 7-Route 13 intersection, but the units soon abandoned their position under fear of a counterattack.<sup>105</sup>

In regard to use of the B–26s, the Joint Chiefs advised Felt on the 20th that it would be "desirable to make the first strike with the maximum number of aircraft in order to gain surprise and to obtain fullest shock value." Four B–26s that were part of the augmentation reached Takhli by the 21st.<sup>106</sup>

On the 20th, the Joint Chiefs also notified Secretary McNamara that the USAF had delivered four C–130s to Okinawa for transfer to Air America (*see Mar. 13*).<sup>107</sup>

**March 21**: In another off-the-record meeting on Laos, which President Kennedy attended, Secretary Rusk argued that "even if we move in, the object is not to fight a big war but to lay a foundation for negotiation." The group agreed to proceed with the actions discussed on March 9, "up to, but short of, the actual commitment of the B–26s and other forces." The consensus was to press the Soviets for a cease-fire and an international conference on Laos, which, in a significant change of course, the

<sup>105.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 54–55 (quote); Coleman interview, 13–14. Colonel Coleman flew to Luang Prabang to supervise the aerial part of the operation. Air America transported fuel for the helicopters from Udorn to Luang Prabang, landing on what Coleman described as a "fairly hairy runway."

<sup>106.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 55, 57.

<sup>107.</sup> Ibid., 55.

administration finally came to accept as inevitable after weeks of resistance to the concept (*see Feb. 2*). If the Soviets did not cooperate, the United States would attempt to persuade the British to support SEATO action and would "prepare to execute the Millpond operation and go on from there."<sup>108</sup>

At the meeting, someone asked Adm. Arleigh Burke, acting as chairman of the Joint Chiefs in General Lemnitzer's absence, how quickly the United States could deploy a sizeable force to Laos. He responded that the military could land 10,000 men in about four days. When pressed on how many could be sent in less time, he estimated 2,000 to 4,000 but added that it would take at least three days for units to land and actually be ready to fight. Burke cabled Admiral Felt that "this amount of time [was] accepted reluctantly."<sup>109</sup>

According to State Department official Roger Hilsman, as a result of the March 20 and 21 meetings, Kennedy decided not to order troops into Laos, but to continue preparations in the event such a move proved necessary. Admiral Felt put Joint Task Force 116 on alert once again, to DefCon 2 on the 22d, while the Seventh Fleet steamed toward the Gulf of Siam (now the Gulf of Thailand) and U.S. Marines on Okinawa readied for deployment (*see Dec. 14, 1960*). The plans approved on March 13 for B–26s, H–34s, and support for Phoumi's forces proceeded on course (*see Mar. 21–23*).<sup>110</sup>

Pacific Command formulated two operations plans during this period, CINCPAC OPLAN 59–62, which outlined a unilateral U.S. rapid deployment of 25,000 ground and air forces to Southeast Asia; and CINCPAC OPLAN X-61, which included Thai, Filipino, Pakistani, and Australian troops in addition to 18,000 Americans. The commander of the task force in either eventuality was to be the commander of the 3d U.S. Marine Division from Okinawa, the central ground element for the deployment. A PACAF mobile strike force was to deploy to bases in Thailand within forty-eight hours' notice to support either plan. The Joint Chiefs approved X-61 on March 29.<sup>111</sup>

As for diplomatic efforts, in a March 21 telegram to W. Averell Harriman, who was serving as ambassador at large and concentrating most of his efforts on Laos, Secretary Rusk noted that the United States "has never been opposed to [an] international conference [on Laos] in principle but has had misgivings because there is yet no known mutually acceptable basis for settlement." There was concern that a conference "might permit [the] continuation of communist intervention aimed at capture of [the]

<sup>108.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:95–96 (quotes), 98–99; Laos Chron. Summary, 55–56; Rust, So Much to Lose, 18–19.

<sup>109.</sup> Rust, So Much to Lose, 19.

<sup>110.</sup> Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 131; Laos Chron. Summary, 61. For the U.S. forces involved, see Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 46.

<sup>111.</sup> Rust, So Much to Lose, 19; Laos Chron. Summary, 68-70, 80-81.

country." Harriman met with Souvanna in New Delhi, India, the next day, where the prince told the ambassador that neither he nor the people of Laos wanted their country to be communist. Souvanna also declared that he was still prime minister of Laos.<sup>112</sup>

**March 21–23**: USAF C–130s and C–124s from 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo), along with smaller USMC aircraft, carried the leading edge of troops and supplies of the approximately 300 U.S. Marines who deployed to Udorn airfield outside of Udon Thani, Thailand, in support of Millpond operations in Laos (*see Mar. 9, 13*). The USMC air base squadron was to provide maintenance for twenty H–34 helicopters (which the Marines called HUS–1s), including four already in operation by Air America (*see Jan. 7*). The mission was supposed to be secret but was documented from first arrival by members of the U.S. media who flew into Vientiane. USAF and USMC flights continued as men and equipment mustered at the spartan airfield at Udorn (*see Feb. 27*). Thirteen of the sanitized helicopters reached the base on March 28, with "Marines" still visible under a fresh coat of paint.<sup>113</sup>

The additional B–26s and the USAF "volunteer" pilots to fly them began arriving at Takhli in the same time frame. The airmen were discharged from the USAF, at least for the duration of the mission, and given commissions in the Royal Lao Air Force. Aderholt, who the USAF promoted to lieutenant colonel around this time, found that of the pilots the Air Force sent, only two had been in combat, and none had flown B–26s. "Most had never dropped a bomb," Aderholt recalled, "so the first thing I had to do was build a bombing range in the Gulf of Siam, go down there, and teach them how to bomb." Gen. Emmett "Rosie" O'Donnell, PACAF commander, visited Takhli during the preparation period and got briefings from Aderholt and his staff.<sup>114</sup>

Even as U.S. servicemen deployed, the military prospects remained murky. The Joint Chiefs dispatched Maj. Gen. Thomas J. H. Trapnell, USA,

<sup>112.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:97 (quotes); Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 47; Laos Chron. Summary, 63–64.

<sup>113.</sup> Hofmann, *Operation Millpond*, 7–12; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 46; Laos Chron. Summary, 83. According to Hofmann (p. 7), the deployment plan called for a total of 455 USMC and USN personnel, but the Thai government and the U.S. State Department agreed on a ceiling of 300. For U.S. efforts to get Thailand to raise the troop ceiling for the Marines to 500, see *FRUS 1961–63*, 23:842.

<sup>114.</sup> Trest, Air Commando One, 111–12 (quotes); Rust, So Much to Lose, 19. For a list of the eighteen USAF pilots who participated, as well as the memories of one of them on the selection, transition, and training process, see Leeker, "Air America in Laos III—In Combat," 2–4. The four Air America pilots at Takhli logged very little time in the B–26s during the period while Aderholt trained the USAF pilots. One recalled only a couple of flights around the Takhli airfield. The Air America men spent most of their time on twice-daily C–46 arms and ammunition drops in Laos. The Air America pilots thought that only about three of their sheep-dipped USAF counterparts seemed up to the requirements of the prospective B–26 missions. Castle, "Operation Millpond," 7–8.



A Douglas C-124 Globemaster II from 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo) off-loading supplies at Udorn, Thailand, in March 1961 in support of Operation Millpond. USMC C-47s are in the background. Hofmann, *Operation Millpond*.

who had commanded MAAG-Indochina before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, to Southeast Asia to survey the situation. On the 23d, he cabled General Lemnitzer and Admiral Felt that Phoumi was "regrouping his forces" after several setbacks (*see Mar. 6*), but Phoumi was insistent that he would still be able to capture the Plain of Jars by May 1. Trapnell considered Phoumi's estimate "unrealistic" and did not think the Laotians could retake the area until June, if at all, even with air support from the B–26s.<sup>115</sup>

On the diplomatic front, on the 22d, Secretary Rusk instructed the U.S. ambassadors in SEATO countries other than France and the United Kingdom to inform their host governments of U.S. willingness to agree to an international conference on Laos, with a cease-fire as an "essential prerequisite" (*see Mar. 21*). Rusk added that the message to the allies should indicate that if the Soviets were "unresponsive [to] our conciliatory offer," the United States would consult with SEATO members to "be prepared [to] move promptly to assist [the] Lao government militarily."<sup>116</sup>

115. Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 20 (quotes); Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 45; Laos Chron. Summary, 48–49. Trapnell elaborated on his observations in a "Report on Laos" he wrote for the Joint Chiefs. He found Laos "made to order" for guerrilla warfare, with limited areas for conventional-force operation. He believed that the H–34s were "as natural for this country as guerrilla warfare." Pathet Lao success was due to North Vietnamese advisors as "stiffeners" down to the company level, but from what Trapnell could learn, the Pathet Lao troops were no better than Phoumi's. Trapnell shared Phoumi's thinking that the Pathet Lao force was capable of achieving that objective. Trapnell thought there should be no restrictions on B–26 use of conventional bombs and napalm. Trapnell also advised that Ambassador Brown be replaced, a recommendation that General Lemnitzer had stricken from the version of the report that the Joint Chiefs forwarded to Secretary McNamara, along with their recommendations, on March 31. Laos Chron. Summary, 87–89.

116. Laos Chron. Summary, 58.

**March 23**: President Kennedy opened a nationally televised news conference with a statement on Laos, declaring it a "difficult and potentially dangerous problem." With a map of Laos behind him, he described the Soviet airlift of more than 1,000 sorties since December 1960 and noted that North Vietnam had sent a "whole supporting set of combat specialists" into Laos, as well as "heavier weapons." Kennedy said that "all of Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence." He stressed that "we strongly and unreservedly support the goal of a neutral and independent Laos."<sup>117</sup>

On the same date, unknown to Kennedy at the time he spoke, the Pathet Lao shot down a USAF attaché C-47 over the Plain of Jars. The aircraft was flying from Vientiane to Saigon but diverted to take reconnaissance photographs of a Pathet Lao encampment en route. The crew was also searching for the source of a radio beacon that was guiding Soviet supply flights. Seven men died in the crash, including six USAF personnel. The lone survivor was Maj. Lawrence R. Bailey Jr., an Army attaché with the embassy in Vientiane, who the Pathet Lao held prisoner for seventeen months. USAF airmen killed were 1Lt. Ralph W. Magee, pilot; 1Lt. Oscar B. Weston, copilot; 2Lt. Glenn Matteson, navigator; SSgt. Alfons A. Bankowski, flight engineer; SSgt. Frederick T. Garside, assistant flight engineer; and SSgt. Leslie V. Sampson, radio operator. All were from 315th Air Division and were in Southeast Asia as part of the Air Force attaché staff, flying reconnaissance missions with and for Lt. Col. Butler Toland (see Jan. 1961). They were the first USAF personnel killed in action in the region since World War II. Another Army attaché staffer, WO1 Edgar W. Weitkamp, also perished in the crash.<sup>118</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, Gen. Thomas White, the USAF chief of staff, ordered Toland to stop using the slow, vulnerable C–47s for reconnaissance flights over Laos. Kennedy vetoed sending RF–101s because of potential international implications. With approval of the State and Defense Departments, Admiral Felt had the military borrow an RT–33 from the Philippine air force, which was scrubbed of markings and

117. Public Papers, 1961, 213–14 (quotes); FRUS 1961–63, 24:100; Jacobs, Universe Unraveling, 245–47. Interestingly, Kennedy chose to understate direct Soviet involvement in his public address. He had been briefed on March 9 that the Soviets had flown 2,000 sorties to Laos. FRUS 1961–63, 24:74. Walt Rostow later said in a 1964 interview that this "press conference was designed to suggest why we could not afford to lose Laos. It was not a commitment to go in and conquer all of Laos." Rostow interview (1964), 77.

118. Toland interview, 34–39; Bailey, *Solitary Survivor*, 5–12, 69–70. The POW Network has extensive information on the crash and the postwar search for the bodies: https://www.pownetwork. org/bios/b/b163.htm. The men who perished are memorialized as names four through eleven on the first panel of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. News of the downing of the aircraft had reached the Western media by March 28, and the *New York Times* ran Bailey's photograph with a story on the 30th titled "Bailey's Release Asked." For the Joint Chiefs' response to Bailey's capture, as well as opinions of senior administration officials, see Laos Chron. Summary, 72–73, 82.



1Lt. Ralph W. Magee was the pilot of a USAF attaché C–47 that was shot down on March 23 while conducting reconnaissance over a Pathet Lao encampment on the Plain of Jars. His name appears sixth on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. *USAF*.

flown by USAF reconnaissance pilots (*see Apr. 17*). During the weeks in late March and early April when the United States contemplated escalated involvement in Laos, however, it had no regular aerial reconnaissance over the areas of active engagement in the country.<sup>119</sup>

**March 25**: In response to questions from the Soviets forwarded through the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Secretary Rusk conceded that, with "strong anti-Communist elements in the government," the United States could agree to minor portfolios for Pathet Lao representatives in a neutral Laos government. On the same date, the State Department received

<sup>119.</sup> Toland interview, 39; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 49. On March 24 in the wake of the shoot-down, the Joint Staff's director of intelligence and deputy director for operations prepared briefs for Secretary McNamara on the attaché staff reconnaissance flights and what they had accomplished. Laos Chron. Summary, 65–66. Toland noted that he and his staff did continue to fly reconnaissance over the Laos panhandle and Cambodia after the incident, but not over the areas of active engagement in north-central Laos. Toland interview, 68.
communication that Souvanna had told the British ambassador in Paris that the "greatest single stumbling block to the final solution of the Laotian problem was the U.S. refusal to accept the Pathet Lao in the government."<sup>120</sup>

Also on the 25th, embassy officials in Saigon notified Rusk that Diem had responded favorably to the U.S. proposal of a cease-fire in Laos, followed by an international conference. Diem highlighted the necessity to "hold firm" for a noncommunist government in Laos and observed that if Laos could not be held, then South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand would eventually fall to the communists.<sup>121</sup>

**March 26**: While Pacific Command planned for either unilateral or SEATO intervention into Laos (*see Mar. 21*), President Kennedy and U.S. diplomats began pressing the United Kingdom and France to support SEATO action. After receiving word that Prime Minister M. Harold Macmillan was "embarrassed" by the U.S. request because it included no details, Kennedy flew on this date to the U.S. naval air station at Key West, Florida, to meet with the British leader, who had been in the West Indies. Macmillan noted in his diary that a large-scale SEATO operation would be a "ruinous undertaking" and told Kennedy he believed that the more limited CIA/paramilitary approach "would make it possible for the Soviets and the Communist Chinese to regard it as an 'incident' and not a war."<sup>122</sup>

When Kennedy returned to Washington that night, the French ambassador met him at Andrews Air Force Base and rode with the president to the White House. The ambassador handed Kennedy a letter from President Charles de Gaulle in which de Gaulle declared that France would not support the use of "SEATO as a possible cover for a direct Western intervention in Laos." Kennedy told the ambassador that he "did not see how the Soviets could be persuaded to agree to a cease-fire without the presence of some threat."<sup>123</sup>

**March 27**: While Secretary Rusk tried to reach consensus with SEATO representatives in Bangkok, President Kennedy met in Washington with Soviet foreign minister Gromyko. Kennedy reported to Rusk that Gromyko told him that the Soviets were studying a proposal from the British for a cease-fire in Laos and an international conference concerning its future and believed that it could be "a basis for pacific settlement acceptable to both sides." Kennedy noted that Gromyko "emphasized several times the importance of [the] exercise of restraint in order to avoid exacerbation of

<sup>120.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 70-71, 73.

<sup>121.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 71.

<sup>122.</sup> Rust, So Much to Lose, 21-22.

<sup>123.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:101-3 (quotes); Rust, So Much to Lose, 22-23.



"All of Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence," President Kennedy told the country during a nationally televised news conference on March 23. *Kennedy Library*.

[the] situation with consequent danger of spreading of [the] conflict." The foreign minister believed that both the Soviets and the Americans should show such restraint. Kennedy "stressed the importance of an immediate cessation of hostilities" and said that he told Gromyko that "as a power whose interests and prestige were at stake, we could not remain inactive if the threat of a military takeover continues."<sup>124</sup>

At the SEATO conference, Rusk and Ambassador Durbrow met with Nguyen Dinh Thuan, the South Vietnamese secretary of state and the number-two man in Diem's government. According to the memorandum of conversation, Thuan "said it was unfortunate that the world in general did not realize the seriousness of the Viet Cong activities and threat in Vietnam," adding later that "very few in the free world" realized that his country "is actually at war." He noted that insurgents were killing 200 to 300 South Vietnamese troops a month and "many more civilians" (*see Jan. 31*). Thuan said his government "basically agreed" with the counterinsurgency

<sup>124.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:105–6 (quotes); Laos Chron. Summary, 74–75. For reports from the SEATO summit, see Laos Chron. Summary, 73–80; see also U. Alexis Johnson with Jef O. McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power: The Memoirs of an American Diplomat* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 304–6.



President Kennedy meeting with Soviet foreign minister Andrei A. Gromyko at the White House on March 27. Gromyko emphasized that the United States should show "restraint" in Laos, but Kennedy reported that he told him that "as a power whose interests and prestige were at stake, we could not remain inactive if the threat of a military takeover continues." *Kennedy Library*.

plan but was "very much concerned" by U.S. insistence that South Vietnam pay for military expansion (*see Feb. 13*). He also explained that the challenges confronting his country made implementation of the political aspects of the document difficult. Rusk countered that "economic and military aid will do no good if efforts are not made simultaneously to explain to the people what the government is doing, the goals they hope to attain, and the sacrifices needed." He also assured Thuan that President Kennedy had personally approved the plan.<sup>125</sup>

**March 28**: General Lemnitzer informed Admiral Felt that because of the delicate international political situation concerning Laos, "higher authority" wished to avoid landing U.S. aircraft in Laos except in cases of emergency. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs directed that the U.S. airlift of artillery and ammunition for Phoumi's troops terminate in Bangkok, with Air America carrying the materiel for the connection to Seno airfield outside of Savannahkhet, Laos, on the Thai border.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>125.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:52-57 (1st quote, 52; 2d-6th quotes, 53; 7th quote, 56).

<sup>126.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 77. The issue of whether the French would have allowed the use of Seno airfield was not addressed (*see Jan. 1961; Apr. 15–17, 1961*).

In a National Intelligence Estimate dated March 28, "Outlook in Mainland Southeast Asia," the "domino theory" still held sway: "There is deep awareness among the countries of Southeast Asia that developments in the Laotian crisis, and its outcome, have a profound impact on their future." While the writers observed that "the Laotian crisis has become a matter of contention among the major powers and its resolution rests primarily in non-Laotian hands," they noted ominously that the "Pathet Lao probably have a greater military capability than they have yet chosen to exercise." They stated that the communist threat in South Vietnam had "reached serious proportions" but thought the chances of a communist victory there in the upcoming year or so "considerably less than they are in Laos." The compilers believed that Diem's situation would become "increasingly difficult, not only because of rising communist guerrilla strength and declining internal security, but also because of widening dissatisfaction with Diem's government." The stakes were higher in South Vietnam, where "U.S. prestige and policy are particularly deeply engaged," and the impact of its loss to the communists would be "similar in kind but considerably more severe than that resulting from the loss or division of Laos."128

**March 29**: Admiral Felt met with Phoumi and urged him to take the offensive. Felt told Phoumi it was important for the "free world" to see that the anticommunist Laotians were fighting for their own country. Phoumi asked for expedited delivery of the promised materiel, including artillery pieces and ammunition (*see Mar. 28*), which Felt assured him could be done. More problematically, Phoumi declared that in view of the "Viet Minh invasion in the South," the United States should intervene overtly in Laos. Felt replied that Washington and the international community would need proof of such North Vietnamese involvement, and of Laotian will to fight, and that the request for direct U.S. intervention would have to be made through diplomatic channels.<sup>129</sup>

Neither the Laotians nor the CIA ever successfully tracked the size and locations of North Vietnamese deployment in Laos during this period. A U.S. intelligence estimate on March 31 noted no North Vietnamese battalions in Laos with the Pathet Lao but identified perhaps 500 cadres, advisors, and technicians, including artillery teams. There may have been

<sup>127.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 78.

<sup>128.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:58–60 (1st quote, 59; 2d–3d, 6th quotes, 58; 5h, 7th–8th quotes, 60). For President Eisenhower and the "falling domino principle," as he called it, see Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:130–31.

<sup>129.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 82.

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some substance to the Laotians claims, however. A Vietnamese official history stated that 12,000 Vietnamese "volunteer troops carried out their international duty on the battlefields of Laos during this campaign." At the time of the Geneva settlement on Laos in July 1962, the North Vietnamese had around 10,000 regulars and 4,000 militiamen in Laos.<sup>130</sup>

Also on March 29, Walt Rostow wrote a memorandum for the president outlining potential next steps for Vietnam. He stated that after the pending Vietnamese election (*see Apr. 9*), the United States should resume pressing Diem to fully approve and implement the counterinsurgency plan (*see Jan. 4, Feb. 13*). He suggested calling General McGarr to Washington to meet with Frederick Nolting, the newly confirmed ambassador who was about to deploy, so the administration could provide "fresh instructions" to both and have them work as a team. Rostow advised that Diem be invited for another visit to the United States or that Vice President Johnson travel to Saigon (*see Apr. 9, 12, May 11–13*) to open a new phase of relations with South Vietnam and impress on Diem that "he must face up to the political and morale elements of the job, as well as its military components." Rostow also thought Kennedy should name a point person within the U.S. government to coordinate Vietnam policy.<sup>131</sup>

**March 30**: Eight USAF B–26s left the continental United States for Okinawa. Most had come from storage at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona. They bore no markings or serial numbers. Lieutenant Colonel Aderholt and the volunteer USAF pilots he was training (*see Mar. 21–23*) picked up the planes at Kadena Air Base on Okinawa and flew them to Takhli on April 11. Although not mentioned in the Pentagon-level planning during March, Aderholt's unit also had three unmarked USAF C–130s at Takhli.<sup>132</sup>

Also on the 30th, Secretary McNamara sent answers to questions Walt Rostow posed after the latter visited the Special Forces training center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to gather information for the president on how the United States could better shape counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam. In response to a query about whether helicopters could be better used against the PLAF and if more should be sent, McNamara responded that General McGarr had told him that the current total of twenty-five helicopters "appeared to be about all that the Vietnamese could effectively use and maintain." The secretary did note that the ARVN had incorporated "training in the use of helicopters in counter-guerrilla instruction." At this point, the

<sup>130.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 83; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 120–24; *Victory in Vietnam*, 87, 456 n. 21 (quote). A MAAG-Laos estimate in August 1961 put the number of North Vietnamese in Laos at 6,500. Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 51.

<sup>131.</sup> Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 168. Diem's only prior visit to the United States during his tenure as president had been in May 1957. Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:229–30.

<sup>132.</sup> Laos Chron. Summary, 84–85; Coleman interview, 15.

single helicopter squadron in Vietnam, flying H–19s and H–34s (*see Dec. 1, 1960*), was part of the VNAF and under USAF advisory supervision.<sup>133</sup>

Rostow also wanted to know why the Special Forces training teams sent in May 1960 had been withdrawn in November (see Feb. 15, May 30, Aug. 30, 1960). As McNamara understood it, the Special Forces had equipped enough ARVN troops to adequately train the limited number of men the ARVN sent to be developed as counterinsurgents. This point led to larger issues that the secretary discussed. One was that previously, the MAAG had only been allowed to train ARVN forces, not the Civil Guard, as Diem had kept the Civil Guard under the interior ministry (see Jan. 27, Sept. 1, 6, 13, Nov. 27, 1960). Another was that Diem "has in the past been trying to conduct counter-guerrilla operations almost personally, and with a complicated fragmentation of responsibilities in the lower levels." McNamara explained that such operations had "involved primarily local resources, including the Civil Guard and police, [and] were supposedly coordinated by the military region commander." Under the U.S. counterinsurgency plan, Diem finally had begun to undertake some of the long-advised military organizational reform, including moving the Civil Guard under the defense ministry so the MAAG could oversee its training.<sup>134</sup>

McNamara told Rostow that as early as March 1960, the U.S. Army had proposed that a 175-man team be sent to Vietnam, with 156 Special Forces and 19 others specializing in civil affairs, intelligence, and psychological warfare (*see Feb. 15, 1960*). Because of restrictions imposed on the size of the MAAG by the Geneva agreement, however, the MAAG had not been willing or able to fit such a large contingent within its 685 total billets. McNamara said that General McGarr still had to "carefully balance the makeup of his personnel," although he noted that it was possible that the ceiling "could be evaded by various subterfuges," ones he indicated that the State Department thus far had been unwilling to entertain. Within seven weeks, however, President Kennedy approved covert deployment of 400 Special Forces as the United States began moving beyond the Geneva limit (*see Apr. 29, May 11*).<sup>135</sup>

**March 31**: At a meeting of State Department representatives and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Walt Rostow asked General Lemnitzer if B–26 strikes in Laos "would be our best reply to communist pressure." The general thought that they would be, noting that eight aircraft were ready and that

<sup>133.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:62.

<sup>134.</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135.</sup> Ibid., 1:63. Rostow forwarded McNamara's memorandum to President Kennedy and to Richard Bissell of the CIA, who was leading a general review of the government's counterinsurgency capabilities. Ibid., 61.



Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, USA, served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from October 1960 to October 1962. His successor, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, USA, is behind him to the left; Roswell Gilpatric, deputy secretary of defense, is on the right in this image from Lemnitzer's retirment ceremony. *Kennedy Library.* 

the full complement of sixteen would be available by April 6. State and the military agreed that there were "no strings" to how the helicopters at Udorn could be used. In discussion of a possible international conference on Laos, General Lemnitzer stated his belief that Pathet Lao forces would "press their attacks" in advance of such a conference. While considering potential outcomes, the chairman observed that the Laotian border with North Vietnam "probably cannot be effectively policed" without a government in Laos that would be cooperative with the West.<sup>136</sup>

On the same date, Secretary Rusk, fresh from the just-concluded SEATO conference, telegraphed Ambassador Brown his opinions on the situation in Laos. Rusk thought that the Boun Oum-Phoumi government did not have the internal or external support to unify the country; that the Pathet Lao was in a position to demand inclusion in the government; and that Souvanna, seemingly the only mediator between the two factions, would not participate in a unified government without Pathet Lao representation. Rusk feared that continued U.S. refusal to allow Pathet Lao inclusion would only serve to prolong the conflict and might result in

136. Ibid., 24:109-10.

a de facto military division of the country. The secretary sought Brown's feedback on alternative suggestions, particularly one that the king, who was largely a figurehead, might lead a transitional government.<sup>137</sup>

Also on the 31st, General Boyle cabled Admiral Felt his recommendation that the U.S. military not provide replacement T–6s for the Lao air force (*see Jan.*). The Pathet Lao had shot down five of the ten aircraft in the Royal Lao fleet. The planes had been ineffective in the operations in which they had been used, and the Laotians did not have ten qualified pilots, although more were undergoing training with the Thai air force.<sup>138</sup>

Meanwhile on the Vietnam front, on the 31st, the Joint Chiefs approved three general recommendations General Trapnell made about Vietnam in his follow-on inspection there after visiting Laos (*see Mar.* 21–23). These were that the U.S. should support and fully implement the counterinsurgency plan (*see Jan. 4, Feb. 13*); should direct military matters through the MAAG instead of the country team headed by the ambassador; and should not reduce MAAG force strength. The Joint Chiefs forwarded Trapnell's more specific recommendations to Admiral Felt for comment (*see Apr. 11*).<sup>139</sup>

137. Laos Chron. Summary, 82. For the limited SEATO attention to Vietnam at this conference, see *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:60–61.

138. Laos Chron. Summary, 87.

139. FRUS 1961-63, 1:61-63, 66.



Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson's visit to Saigon in May 1961, right after the cease-fire in Laos, signaled a deepening of U.S. commitment to Vietnam. This image is from Johnson's farewell breakfast at Diem's palace. Diem is in front with Lady Bird Johnson. Tran Le Xuan (Madame Nhu), who served as Diem's official hostess in the manner of a first lady, is next, followed by Vice President Johnson. The woman behind Johnson with the large fan is Jean Kennedy Smith, President Kennedy's sister, with her husband, Stephen Smith, over her right shoulder. The man next to Stephen Smith in the darker suit is Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother and confidant. *Johnson Library*.

# Four

# From the Brink in Laos to a Stand in Vietnam April–June 1961

After less than three months in office, the John Kennedy administration faced numerous major challenges as of April 1961. In the middle of the month, the Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba went awry, leaving the president embarrassed and increasingly distrustful of the national security establishment, just as those same officials were attempting to formulate a coherent policy for Laos. As the situation there deteriorated, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Defense Department presented Kennedy with a myriad of options, none of them good. Debate also continued on whether to have a USAF detachment assigned to the CIA carry out bombing missions in unmarked B–26s. A tenuous cease-fire agreement on May 3 allowed the administration to avoid difficult decisions on intervention, but the advantageous position of the Pathet Lao and its allied forces ensured significant communist participation in whatever government emerged from the peace conference.

With the problems in Laos and Cuba and a brewing crisis over Berlin that emerged in June, "The administration was impregnated with the belief that communism worldwide . . . was on the offensive," State Department official William P. Bundy later observed. Kennedy's men thought that "this offensive had been allowed to gain dangerous momentum in the last two years of the Eisenhower administration, and that it now must be met solidly."<sup>1</sup> Kennedy and his advisors identified Vietnam as a place where

<sup>1.</sup> Quoted in William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part II: 1961–1964 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 41. Bundy's position at this time was deputy assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, but as the well-connected brother of the national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, William Bundy played a much larger role in the debates than his title might indicate. Walt Rostow echoed Bundy, stating in a 1964 interview that the Vietnam problem "was so far advanced by the time we got to it. The period between 1958 and 1961 had not been used well. The communists had Vietnam at Mao's Stage Two, advanced guerrilla warfare, with an open frontier to boot. That is a hard disease to cure." Rostow interview (1964), 46. See also Johnson, *Right Hand of Power*, 329.

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the United States would have to make a stand, not just for the future of Southeast Asia, but for its own international credibility. Vice President Lyndon Johnson visited Saigon in May, the same month that Kennedy approved the deployment of 400 U.S. Special Forces to Vietnam, as well as several other increased aid measures.

Beyond the credibility issue, the reasons for the shift of emphasis to Vietnam at this time are not entirely clear in the historical record. Nothing in particular had changed in the spring of 1961, and summer was the rainy season, when military advances tended to abate. PLAF insurgent activities continued but had not yet increased, as they would in the fall. The issues with President Ngo Dinh Diem's government were the same as they had been for years, although the Kennedy administration hoped that the United States could gain more cooperation from Diem and his associates through the work of a new, more sympathetic ambassador, Frederick Nolting.

During the same period, the USAF began development of its own special forces capabilities, as Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, then vice chief of staff, personally oversaw the establishment of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron in April. A detachment from that unit would deploy to Vietnam seven months later to carry out the operation known as Farm Gate.

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**April**: As a show of increased U.S. support for Thailand, the USAF sent four F–102s from the 509th Fighter Interceptor Squadron at Clark Air Base in the Philippines to Don Muang airfield outside Bangkok for what was labeled Operation Bell Tone. An advanced element of Thirteenth Air Force established a control and reporting center (CRC) at Don Muang to support the Bell Tone missions, with personnel on ninety-day temporary duty (TDY) rotations from PACAF units. According to the PACAF history of the time frame, the F–102 deployment "marked the first time that U.S. combat forces had been stationed in Southeast Asia for an indefinite period."<sup>2</sup>

Also during the month, under pressure from the MAAG and the U.S. embassy, Diem reorganized his military command structure. According to historian Graham A. Cosmas, the ground forces chain of command "ran in theory from the Joint General Staff, which functioned as the supreme command of both the armed forces and the army, through an Army Field

<sup>2.</sup> Futrell Chron., 7; Glasser, *Secret Vietnam War*, 18; PACAF History, July–December 1961, v. 1, 2:18 (quote); "History of the 2nd ADVON," 15 November 1961–8 October 1962, AFHRA, 1:3–4 (hereafter 2d ADVON History, November 1961–October 1962); *FRUS 1961–63*, 23:843–44. The PACAF History for January–June 1961 indicates that F–100s may have been the initial aircraft deployed, but the later histories exclusively mention F–102s.

Command to three regional corps headquarters, each of which controlled several divisions." In practice, however, "concerned with keeping his armed men divided lest they overthrow him, Diem subverted this structure as he had earlier ones. He ignored the Field Command because he considered its commander, the able and popular Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh, politically unreliable and sent orders to the army directly through the Joint General Staff." Vietnamese special forces were outside of the army command structure entirely, and Diem left control of the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps to the province chiefs, who also had authority over ARVN troops within their provinces (*see Mar. 10, 1960*).<sup>3</sup>

**April 1**: The U.S. ambassador in Moscow reported that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev told him that "if we were both honest and sincere in wanting [a] neutral and independent Laos, we could overcome difficulties and arrive at [a] solution."<sup>4</sup>

**April 3**: The Soviets began a two-day operation in Laos during which their aircraft dropped Kong Le's paratroopers west of Vang Vieng. Gen. Phoumi Nosavan's Royal Lao force and Air America responded by using C–47s and the recently arrived H–34 helicopters (*see Mar. 21–23*) to transfer 640 Laotian government troops to a location east of the town.<sup>5</sup>

On the same date, in a speech at the American Community School in Saigon, outgoing Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow declared that South Vietnam was a "country at war with the communists," involved in an "undeclared hot war." He added that "we must all recognize it as such."<sup>6</sup>

**April 4**: The Soviets broadcast a message in Vietnamese to Southeast Asia in which they repeated their objection to U.S. insistence on a cease-fire in Laos as a precondition for negotiations. U.S. State Department officials eventually determined that what the Soviets actually meant was that they wanted agreement on an international conference on Laos before a ceasefire, but that a cease-fire could take effect before peace talks convened.<sup>7</sup>

**April 6**: During a meeting with members of the press at the State Department, President John Kennedy conceded that Phoumi's army "has not

<sup>3.</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation*, 1962–1967 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006), 82 (quotes), https://history.army.mil/html/ books/091/91-6/CMH\_Pub\_91-6.pdf; Don, *Our Endless War*, 78. General Don, who later collaborated with Minh to lead the successful coup against Diem in November 1963, thought Ngo Dinh Nhu was behind the decision to sideline Minh and the "highly qualified headquarters staff" of Army Field Command. Minh's only real function was as inspector of 1st and 2d Corps.

<sup>4.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:111.

<sup>5.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 47.

<sup>6.</sup> Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 242.

<sup>7.</sup> Hilsman, To Move a Nation, 133.

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maintained the fighting with the vigor we might have hoped." Nevertheless, the president said the United States stood ready to intervene if the Royal Lao Army was on the verge of defeat.<sup>8</sup>

**April 9**: After years of U.S. encouragement to do so, Ngo Dinh Diem finally held a presidential election, winning a term that ran through 1966. Ambassador Durbrow called the canvass a sham as Diem won nearly 90 percent of the vote. The CIA also believed the election was rigged. The NLF bombed a few polling places but generally failed to deter turnout. The Kennedy administration considered sending Vice President Lyndon Johnson to Diem's April 29 inauguration but could not get the logistics arranged in the short time frame.<sup>9</sup>

Also on the 9th, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai met with North Vietnamese leaders Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan, and Pham Van Dong in southern China to discuss the situation in Laos. This group reached a basic agreement to support the Soviet call for an international conference. In a conversation three days later with the prime minister of Burma, Zhou blamed the Laotian civil war on the United States. He observed that if the United States "initiated a partial war [in Laos], it would be difficult to fight it due to the lack of open space" in a land "full of forests." Zhou thought the United States would find itself in a conflict worse than the Korean War if it intervened.<sup>10</sup>

**April 11**: After receiving feedback from Adm. Harry Felt, the CINCPAC, on Maj. Gen. Thomas Trapnell's suggestions for Vietnam (*see Mar. 31*), the Joint Chiefs sent Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara their recommendations based on Trapnell's framework. These included full financial support for the 20,000-troop ARVN expansion and funding for the entire 68,000-man Civil Guard (*see Feb. 13*). At the time, the United States was paying for only 32,000 of the latter force.<sup>11</sup>

On the same date, in a two-hour meeting with influential *Washington Post* columnist Joseph W. Alsop V, Diem criticized the United States for not fully supporting him and expressed regret that Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale was not being sent as the new ambassador (*see Jan. 28*). In response to Diem's complaints, Ambassador Durbrow suggested that the State Department issue instructions that more closely tied potential funding for the pending ARVN force increase to Diem's compliance with broader reforms spelled out in the counterinsurgency plan (*see Feb. 13*). As Walt

<sup>8.</sup> Jacobs, Universe Unraveling, 248.

<sup>9.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:68–69, 82–83, 135; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 245–46. For extensive background on the election, see Frankum, *Vietnam's Year of the Rat*, 170–98.

<sup>10.</sup> Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 97-98.

<sup>11.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:67; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:178.

Rostow, the deputy national security advisor, put it in a memorandum for the president, "Durbrow has reacted with some force—perhaps excessive force." Rostow thought Lansdale "may have been good" as ambassador but also vouched for the already-confirmed selectee, Frederick Nolting. He added that "we must find a way to send Lansdale for a visit to Vietnam soon" to help lay the groundwork for Nolting. Lansdale also wrote a note in response to the Alsop report in which he said that authorizing Durbrow's request to "lay down the law" would be a "mistake." He advocated that he travel to Vietnam with Rostow and either Secretary McNamara or Deputy Secretary Roswell Gilpatric to review the state of affairs.<sup>12</sup>

**April 12**: In a major propaganda coup for America's most-feared foe, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri A. Gagarin became the first person to travel in space and orbit the earth. On the same date, the Kennedy administration received news that the Pathet Lao had forced Phoumi's troops into retreat in Laos.<sup>13</sup>

Also on the 12th, Rostow laid out the administration's possible next steps for post-election Vietnam (see Apr. 9) in a memorandum for President Kennedy. The first priority was the "appointment of a full time first-rate back-stop man in Washington." Maxwell Taylor sort of became that person when Kennedy convinced him to join the administration full time (see July 1), although his portfolio soon ranged far beyond Vietnam. Rostow wanted new Ambassador Frederick Nolting fully briefed before he deployed to Saigon (see May 10), including by Kennedy, so he understood the administration's priorities in the region. As he had suggested on March 29, Rostow reiterated that it would be good for Vice President Johnson to visit Vietnam "in the near future." The document also listed several items the nascent Vietnam task force would address over subsequent weeks (see Apr. 20), including the possibility of raising or bypassing the MAAG troop ceiling with U.S. Special Forces (see Apr. 29, May 11), settling the issue of increased funding that Diem wanted (see Feb. 13, Apr. 11), and deploying a research and development team to Vietnam (see May 20, Aug. 10). One of the first projects the latter office undertook once established in Saigon was the development of a defoliant capability that later evolved into Operation Ranch Hand (see Aug. 10, 24, Sept. 29, Oct. 22, Nov. 3, 7). Rostow concluded his list with a call to address the perpetually vexing issue of developing "tactics of persuading Diem to move more rapidly to broaden the base of his government, as well as to decrease its centralization and improve its efficiency."14

<sup>12.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:72-73.

<sup>13.</sup> Bissell, Reflections of a Cold Warrior, 182.

<sup>14.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:68.

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**April 14**: Under Tactical Air Command (TAC), the USAF activated 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (CCTS), which became widely known as Jungle Jim, at Hurlburt Field, Florida, an auxiliary field of Eglin Air Force Base. The USAF authorized the unit for 124 officers and 228 enlisted, and TAC assigned the squadron to Ninth Air Force. It was reassigned to TAC headquarters in August and achieved operational readiness in September, by which time it already had a small detachment deployed to Mali.<sup>15</sup>

Col. Benjamin H. King, the unit's first commander, later commented that "the forming of the 4400th was a reaction [by the Air Force] to the Special Forces." According to General Lansdale, Gen. Curtis LeMay, USAF vice chief of staff, provided the "impetus" for the outfit's creation. It was LeMay's "own personal sort of child," according to Lansdale, and he was "intensely interested in seeing it formed and . . . given a chance."<sup>16</sup>

A general from USAF headquarters (unnamed in the source) told the 4400th's initial officers that LeMay had gotten the idea for such a unit after getting "boiling mad" at an order from Secretary McNamara to provide a sanitized World War II-era aircraft to the CIA. As LeMay and his staff discussed what they could do, they decided that the USAF could collect several such planes and build an organization with its own capabilities, with Southeast Asia in mind. According to LeMay, "We couldn't put firstclass equipment in there because it was violating the Geneva accords." He protested that "the Reds [communists] were violating it right and left," but once he "finally got it through my thick skull that this is the way we're going to have to operate," he proposed to the Joint Chiefs "that we get ready for this sort of stuff by having the Air Force form an outfit that was equipped with these junked airplanes." He wanted the unit to be ready for "not only defensive action against guerrilla type warfare, but [with] capability of offensive action as guerrillas," and to support the Special Forces.<sup>17</sup>

15. Herbert H. Kissling, An Air Commando and Special Operations Chronology, 1961–1991 (Hurlburt Field, FL: First Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, n.d.), 4–5; Bowers, Tactical Airlift, 41–42; Trest, Air Commando One, 120–21; Futrell, Advisory Years, 79.

16. Benjamin H. King, interview with Maj. Samuel J. Riddlebarger and Lt. Col. Valentino Castellina, September 4, 1969, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 00904092, p. 41 (1st quote) (hereafter King interview); Lansdale interview (1971), 72–75 (quotes, 74–75).

17. Robert L. Gleason, *Air Commando Chronicles: Untold Tales from Vietnam, Latin America, and Back Again* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 2000), 3–4 (1st quote); Kenneth H. Williams, ed., *LeMay on Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2017), 37 (2d–3d quotes), 72 (4th–5th quotes), https://media.defense.gov/2017/Mar/23/2001721069/-1/-1/0/ LEMAY%200N%20VIETNAM.PDF; Curtis E. LeMay, interview with Thomas G. Belden, March 29, 1972, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 00904611, pp. 4–5 (6th quote). LeMay stated in the March 1972 interview (p. 4) of the 4400th that "we called it a commando outfit, and this was not a very good name because even a lot of congressmen wanted to know what in the hell the Air Force wanted with commando outfits. They were taking it as a foot soldier. And they weren't foot soldiers; they were airmen who would form part of the team of a commando outfit. It was land, sea, and air wherever it was wanted—a team to do particular jobs."



Col. Benjamin H. King, shown later in his career as a brigadier general. In 1961, an officer awakened King in the middle of the night, telling him he had thirty minutes to respond to the Pentagon about whether he would volunteer for an unknown assignment, which turned out to be command of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, known as Jungle Jim. USAF.

The 4400th had virtually no guidance at its inception, however. King, who formally took command on May 1, heard nothing from the Pentagon for more than a month after activation. Even when he did, "It was always inferences and innuendos," King recalled, which "made my job difficult." According to King, "The cover-up that was put out for the organization" was that "we would be teaching foreign students to fly and perform combat-type missions" in what King called "obsolete aircraft," including T–28s, C–47s, and B–26s. When he finally spoke with General LeMay, he concluded that "we *were* to develop this [training] capability," but that "primarily our job was to be able to conduct combat operations with the aircraft that we had been assigned . . . under extremely austere operating conditions anywhere in the world, and be a responsive force, either overtly



A North American T–28C Trojan in Vietnam with the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron. Colonel King initially wanted another USN airframe, the F–8, but when he inquired about those aircraft for his unit, he was told that last ones in the U.S. inventory had just been destroyed. The two-seat T–28 proved invaluable when the 4400th received orders to train VNAF pilots. USAF.

or covertly, to support United States policy." He added, though, that the mission was "never stated in this context or never stated in those words."<sup>18</sup>

The 4400th trained to transport and insert Special Forces and had two advisors from the Special Forces on its training team to coordinate their efforts. When a detachment from the 4400th deployed to Vietnam in November 1961 to carry out Operation Farm Gate (*see Oct. 11, 13, Nov. 5, 14*), however, the USAF personnel found that the Army was extremely resistant to being seen using the capability that the 4400th could supply. This development was one of several ambiguities about its mission (*see Nov. 14*). By the time the 4400th arrived in Vietnam, King thought that his men were "much better skilled" in their specialties than Special Forces troops were.<sup>19</sup>

The shift to antiquated, prop-driven planes was awkward for the pilots, who had been flying modern, high-performance aircraft, particularly for the fighter pilots, who had to transition to propeller-driven T–28s. Cargo planes presented similar challenges, as one pilot noted that "it took me a considerable amount of time to actually just learn to take off and land [in] the C–47" as he "had no conventional landing gear time previously, so that was quite an

18. King interview, 6–7. When asked about the origins of the 4400th, King recounted (pp. 1–5) that he was awakened around 2 or 3 a.m. on a Saturday morning by an officer who had thirty minutes to respond to the Pentagon about whether King would interview for, and "volunteer" for, an unspecified mission. A week later, King heard that he had been approved, but for what he did not know. Several days passed before an officer summoned King for a meeting with Lt. Gen. Gabriel P. Disosway, the TAC vice commander. According to King, the general explained, "very cursorily, what was happening. And when he got through, he turned to me and said, 'Do you understand what's going on? Because you're the boss." King added that he did not think the vagueness "was because General Disosway had guidance and couldn't release it. I don't think he had guidance as to what, initially, we were supposed to do" (quotes, 3). Disosway told King that every man of the approximately 300 he would be assigned would be a volunteer, but not all were, particularly most of the enlisted airmen in the ground crew.

19. King interview, 38, 41-43, 113-14 (quote); Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 17.

adjustment as far as that was concerned." The 4400th pilots collectively flew more than 9,000 hours over the relatively brief training period.<sup>20</sup>

As for weapons, LeMay managed to go outside channels and obtain Colt ArmaLite AR-15s for the unit's aircrews. The men of the 4400th were the first U.S. troops to carry these rifles in Vietnam, two years before the U.S. military approved and ordered what became known as the M16.<sup>21</sup>

**April 15–17**: As the highest levels of the Kennedy administration focused on the impending incursion in Cuba (*see Apr. 17–19*), a new concern emerged in Laos as Pathet Lao troops threatened Thakhek, on the Thai border along the Mekong River in the panhandle of Laos. Thakhek was at the intersection of two main roads about fifty miles north of Savannakhet, which was Phoumi's military and political power base.<sup>22</sup>

Eleven hours ahead of Washington time in Takhli, Lt. Col. Harry "Heinie" Aderholt on the 16th prepared the sixteen unmarked B–26s for what was to be their first combat mission over the Plain of Jars, scheduled for the 17th. Aderholt had four Air America pilots with experience over Laos at his disposal (*see Mar. 21–23*). He assigned each one to lead a four-aircraft cell, with out-of-uniform, temporarily discharged ("sheep-dipped") USAF pilots flying the other planes in each cell. Aderholt gave the men papers identifying them as officers in the Royal Lao Air Force.<sup>23</sup>

Around 3 a.m. on the 17th in Takhli, Aderholt received orders to scrub the mission, which would have been issued by 4 p.m. on the 16th Washington time. The available sources give no indication of why the administration cancelled the mission or if the decision was connected to the Bay of Pigs operation. President Kennedy on the 16th also stopped the air support for the Cuban assault.<sup>24</sup>

20. Gleason, *Air Commando Chronicles*, 18–19; Roy H. Lynn, interview with Ray L. Bowers and Victor Anthony, September 9, 1970, typescript, Air Force Historical Support Division, 1 (quotes).

22. FRUS 1961-63, 24:136; Rust, So Much to Lose, 24.

23. Trest, *Air Commando One*, 114–15; Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, 52. Conboy and Morrison, citing an interview with one of the sheep-dipped USAF pilots, recorded that the B–26s were armed with 250-pound bombs, despite the State Department's prohibition against bombs in Laos. Each aircraft was to carry two napalm canisters, but Ambassador Brown protested the use of napalm at the last minute, and the ground crew replaced the canisters with iron bombs.

24. Castle, "Operation Millpond," 1–12. Castle thought the decisions to scuttle air operations in Laos and in Cuba on the same day were linked, but he could not establish the exact connection. He posited that it may have been the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Adlai Stevenson, who some senior CIA officials came to believe talked Kennedy into cancelling the Bay of Pigs air support. In late March as the United States had deployed men and aircraft to Thailand for prospective operations in Laos, Stevenson had sent a series of cables to Secretary Rusk urging UN political action in Laos before any military engagement. It is likely he pressed the same line of argument when speaking with the president, with whom he was furious when he talked with Kennedy on April 16 because of the lack of detail he had received on the Cuban plans. Bissell, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior*, 183–84, 196; Laos Chron. Summary, 77. Several secondary sources claim that the eleven-hour time difference, however, the order had to have been sent to Aderholt before the initial landings in Cuba.

<sup>21.</sup> Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 22-23.

The Kennedy administration's Laos task force met on the 17th, with its participants concurring that the B–26s were "capable of shooting up the supplies" on the Plain of Jars but "unlikely to be able to stop the investiture" of Thakhek. U.S. representatives had talked with the Thais about sending troops across the Mekong to defend Thakhek, but the Thais insisted that such a move would have to be a joint Thai-U.S. operation. Walt Rostow concluded that "in light of all this, we may be up against a rather fine-grained decision." He observed in a memorandum for President Kennedy that if the United States and its allies did not want to enter into an international conference on Laos with the country split by the communists, "some outside force may have to move into the river towns in the very near future." Laos was only about sixty miles wide at the latitude on which Thakhek lay. Although no ground troops deployed, USAF C–130s from Aderholt's unit did airlift a Thai artillery unit and equipment to Seno airfield, outside Savannakhet, later that week.<sup>25</sup>

As a sign of U.S.-Thai cooperation, and of the increased prospect of operations in the area, a USAF C–124 airlifted a control and reporting center from Clark Air Base to Don Muang between April 15 and 17. The Clark-based 510th Tactical Fighter Squadron also deployed six F–100s to Don Muang for air defense of Bangkok.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, the USAF had sixteen additional B–26s ready to send to the theater, per Secretary McNamara's order. It ultimately deployed only two, both configured as RB–26 reconnaissance aircraft, flown by USAF pilots. Although Ambassador Winthrop Brown called for air strikes later in the month by the B–26s already at Takhli (*see Apr. 23*), these planes never flew any combat sorties. They remained at Takhli for three more months but flew only reconnaissance missions.<sup>27</sup>

**April 16**: Khrushchev called Pathet Lao leader Prince Souphanouvong to Moscow and told him to have the Pathet Lao negotiate a cease-fire.<sup>28</sup>

**April 17**: USAF RF–101 pilots from the 15th and 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadrons deployed to Udorn, Thailand, for Operation Field Goal, during which they flew a single, borrowed Philippine air force RT–33 scrubbed of markings on reconnaissance missions over Laos (*see Mar. 23*). The pilots encountered the same problems that Lt. Col. Butler

<sup>25.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:136; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 441. Col. Harry Coleman, the USAF officer in charge of all air assets in Laos, coordinated the airlift. He sought official approval from the French to land at their base at Seno, but whether he actually received that authorization before telling Lieutenant Colonel Aderholt to carry out the time-sensitive mission is unclear in his interview. Coleman interview, 18–21.

<sup>26.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 48.

<sup>27.</sup> Ibid., 47; Trest, Air Commando One, 115-16; Castle, "Operation Millpond," 8-9.

<sup>28.</sup> Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 100.



Lt. Col. Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt, USAF, shown as a colonel in 1964 when he was heading 1st Air Commando Wing training at Hurlburt Field, the successor organization to the 4400th CCTS. In 1960–62, he and his USAF detachment were detailed to the CIA, for which Aderholt supervised covert air operations in Laos from the base in Takhli, Thailand. *USAF*.

Toland and his crews had, finding few landmarks to follow such as roads, railroads, and canals, having only outdated maps to guide them (*see Aug. 9, 1960*). While superior to C–47s for the work, the RT–33 suffered from range, speed, and altitude limitations. Film from Field Goal flights had to be processed at Clark Air Base, with prints sent to Yokota Air Base near Tokyo for full examination by the 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron. The RT–33 flew twenty-three sorties between April and July, although it ceased flying missions over Laos as of May 10. The small detachment of three officers and five enlisted men relocated from Udorn to Don Muang in July (*see July 17*).<sup>29</sup>

**April 17–19**: The CIA-sponsored invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs failed disastrously, with direct implications for the situation in Laos. Richard Nixon recounted that President Kennedy told him right after the

<sup>29. 2</sup>d ADVON History, November 1961–October 1962, 1:4; PACAF History, July–December 1961, v. 1, 2:17, 19; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 49; Glasser, *Secret Vietnam War*, 17–18.



This Operation Field Goal image in May 1961 confirmed improvements to the airfield at Vang Vieng, Laos, about seventy-five miles north of Vientiane. The Soviets used this field as a forward airhead to supply communist-allied troops. USAF pilots flew the Field Goal missions out of Udorn, Thailand, in a borrowed Philippine air force RT-33 scrubbed of markings. USAF.

incursion that he could not see how the United States could get involved in Laos, even with air power, if it was not willing to directly intervene in Cuba, just ninety miles off its shores. Kennedy had a similar conversation with Dwight Eisenhower in the same time frame, and Douglas MacArthur cautioned the president in another meeting against committing ground troops in Southeast Asia. Kennedy's advisors, particularly those outside the military, began arguing that there was little justification for large-scale involvement in Laos.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30.</sup> Nixon, "Cuba, Castro and John F. Kennedy," 290–92; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 641, 644; Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 24–25; Rostow interview (1964), 54; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 64; *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:143.

In Laos, Col. Harry Coleman, the senior air advisor who Admiral Felt had directed to lay the groundwork for Joint Task Force 116 (*see Late Jan.*), had similar thoughts about the implications of the failed assault in Cuba. He later speculated that "I believe in my mind that if the Bay of Pigs had either not been run or had been successful, we would have launched in Laos. The 116 would have been formed and gone."<sup>31</sup>

As the situation in Laos worsened later in the month, Kennedy was "far more skeptical of the experts" after the Bay of Pigs, according to advisor and speechwriter Ted Sorensen. The president had Sorensen and Robert F. Kennedy, the U.S. attorney general, start attending national security meetings to help him sort through the Pentagon's recommendations (*see Apr. 28, 29*). Focus on a cease-fire intensified, preferably to be agreed upon before Phoumi lost too much ground to end hope of a negotiated settlement favorable to the West.<sup>32</sup>

**April 20**: Admiral Felt redesignated Joint Task Force 116 and its air element as part of the SEATO Field Force, and the naval component from the Seventh Fleet steamed into the Gulf of Siam. U.S. Marines on Okinawa remained on standby, as did USAF aircraft and crews to transport them.<sup>33</sup>

On the same date, President Kennedy elevated the advisory effort in Laos to a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). The British, as cochairs of the Geneva Conference on Indochina, had reluctantly agreed to this move. Prior to this point, U.S. military personnel, including General Boyle, had served out of uniform in ostensibly civilian advisory roles because of Geneva restrictions against foreign troops in Laos. As active engagement in Laos had increased, the Pentagon had expressed concern that U.S. troops might not be accorded treatment as prisoners of war if captured out of uniform.<sup>34</sup>

On the 20th, Kennedy also ordered Roswell Gilpatric, the deputy secretary of defense, to develop a comprehensive program to prevent South

33. Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 48.

34. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 48; *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:137; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 249–50. General Trapnell had lobbied for the transition to a MAAG in his report after visiting Laos in March. Laos Chron. Summary, 87. How much actual change took place, and how quickly, is unclear. Col. Harry Coleman did not recall going into uniform until mid-June. Coleman interview, 33.

<sup>31.</sup> Coleman interview, 60.

<sup>32.</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 644 (quote); Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 337–38. Walt Rostow called Laos and the Bay of Pigs "parallel and reinforcing experiences" for Kennedy's skepticism of the military. Rostow interview (1964), 47. See also H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 6–7; Curtis E. LeMay, interview with Robert F. Futrell, Jacob Van Staaveren, and Thomas G. Belden, June 8, 1972, transcript, AFHRA, IRIS no. 00904608, pp. 18–25. General LeMay, who sat in on a briefing of Bay of Pigs plans while vice chief of staff, later described it (p. 24) as "an operation that was planned outside the military, operated outside the military, but the military got blamed for it."

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Vietnam from falling to the communists. General Lansdale had suggested in a memo to the president that Kennedy create a Vietnam task force. Gilpatric made Lansdale the point person for the new committee, a move that Walt Rostow favored but that was not welcome news to Lansdale's critics (see Jan. 21, 28). State Department officials attempted to thwart Lansdale at every step of the process, prompting Lansdale to write Secretary McNamara that "the U.S. past performance and theory of action, which State apparently desires to continue, simply offers no sound basis for winning as desired by President Kennedy." Gilpatric envisioned deploying Lansdale to Vietnam as operations officer for the task force, but the State Department vetoed that assignment. Lansdale drafted the task force report, with State submitting a counterproposal that the group also forwarded to the president. Although Kennedy approved several provisions recommended by the task force on April 29, the action plan that resulted did not emerge until May 11, when new Ambassador Nolting and Vice President Johnson were already in Saigon (see Apr. 29; May 4, 10, 11, 11-13).35

Maj. Gen. Theodore Milton, who became Thirteenth Air Force commander in 1961, recalled that Lansdale "was in very bad odor with our State Department. They didn't like him at all. They were scared to death of him," presumably because of his CIA experience and high-level connections across Asia.<sup>36</sup>

**April 21**: As calls for greater U.S. involvement in Laos increased, so did U.S. media criticism of the Royal Lao Army that the United States was supporting. On this date, the *New York Times* published an account by correspondent Jacques Nevard that described the "typical Laotian soldier" as a "laughing young peasant" who "abhors killing" and "sings, dances, and plays music at every break as his 100-man company moves toward the front, often with a plucked jungle flower sticking out of the muzzle of his ill-kept rifle." A *Times* reporter had written bluntly three days earlier

36. Milton interview, 109.

<sup>35.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:74–134 (Lansdale quote, 116 n. 5); U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:22–35, 42–61; Currey, Lansdale, 229–35; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 246–47; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:90–91. Currey (p. 234) noted that Diem made four requests that Lansdale be sent to Vietnam, and Maxwell Taylor and William Bundy also lobbied for his deployment. Shulimson (pp. 89–94) has extensive detail on the revisions and the infighting over the task force report. Nolting said that he "sat in on the deliberations of the task force, and that really constituted my briefing for my new assignment. I was not closely familiar with Vietnam before that." Frederick E. Nolting Jr., interview with Joseph E. O'Connor, May 14, 1966, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 2, https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/archives/JFKOH/Nolting%2C%20Frederick%20E/JFKOH-FEN-01/JFKOH-FEN-01-TR.pdf (hereafter Nolting interview [1966]). The ambassador singled out Lansdale as "one person [on the task force] I learned a lot from." Frederick E. Nolting Jr., interview with Dennis O'Brien, May 6, 7, 1970, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 39, https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/archives/JFKOH/Nolting%2C%20Frederick%20E/JFKOH-FEN-02/JFKOH-FEN-02-TR.pdf (hereafter Nolting interview [1970]).



In the wake of the Bay of Pigs disaster and the worsening situation in Laos, President Kennedy met with former President Dwight D. Eisenhower at Camp David, Maryland, on April 22. Kennedy told Eisenhower that he did not think U.S. unilateral intervention in Laos could salvage the situation there, but he remained hopeful of a cease-fire. *Kennedy Library*.

that "it has become clear to observers here that the Laotian army . . . has no will to fight."  $^{37}$ 

**April 22**: In Moscow, Prince Souvanna Phouma signed a joint communique with the Soviets calling for the neutralization of Laos. At some point in April, before Souvanna made this trip, there had been talk of him visiting Washington. Secretary of State Dean Rusk refused to rearrange his schedule to accommodate the exiled Laotian leader, and Souvanna chose not to come.<sup>38</sup>

Also on April 22, President Kennedy met with Dwight Eisenhower. Kennedy told the former president that unilateral military intervention would not be able to save Laos, adding that he was hopeful for a ceasefire agreement.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37.</sup> Quoted in Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 229 (1st–4th quotes); Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 47 (5th quote). Jacobs (pp. 209–34) included a chapter on U.S. media coverage of Laos in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

<sup>38.</sup> Futrell Chron., 7; Brown interview, 21.

<sup>39.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:143 n. 3.



A Douglas B–26B Invader at Takhli, Thailand, during the spring of 1961, painted black with no marking. Despite much discussion at the highest levels about the possible use of these aircraft for various missions in Laos, they ultimately flew no combat sorties. *Leeker, "Air America in Laos III."* 

**April 23**: A combined Pathet Lao/Kong Le force recaptured Vang Vieng, which had an airfield with an improved runway and lay only about seventy-five miles north of Vientiane (*see Jan. 16*). This reversal prompted Ambassador Brown, who had shared the State Department's antipathy toward the use of heavy ordnance in Laos (*see Late Jan., Mar. 13*), to change course and seek standby authority for the B–26s at Takhli to be approved for bombing missions if the situation worsened (*see Apr. 26*). Washington granted the request on the same date.<sup>40</sup>

**April 24**: The British and Soviet foreign ministers, speaking for their countries as cochairs of the Geneva Conference on Indochina, called for a cease-fire in Laos, to go into effect on May 3. They also appealed for an international conference on Laos and asked the Indian government to reactivate the International Control Commission (ICC), which had policed the 1954 Geneva agreement. The U.S. State Department issued a statement on April 25 in which it agreed with the proposals, asserting that the "first essential step" was to have a cease-fire in place before convening a conference. The Pathet Lao made no reply to the Soviet-British communique, leaving the Kennedy administration wondering whether the Soviets were honest brokers in this situation.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 48.

<sup>41.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:138-39 (quote); Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 322.

On the same date, Lt. Gen. Lionel McGarr, MAAG-Vietnam commander, gave a briefing in Washington for the president's Vietnam task force. He stated that the MAAG estimated that the ARVN had only 42 percent of South Vietnam under "firm" control, with the rest of the country infested with communist infiltration to varying degrees.<sup>42</sup>

**April 26**: Six USAF C–130s landed at Wattay airfield in Vientiane, transporting parachutes and other military supplies. C–130 and C–124 flights to Wattay continued for several weeks.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, the situation in Laos continued to worsen. On the 26th, Phoumi appealed for air support from the B–26s for his beleaguered troops, and Ambassador Brown finally concurred (*see Apr. 23*). Brown and General Boyle asked Washington for authority to activate the bombers if the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces moved closer to major cities and noted that SEATO ground troops might be needed as well. Admiral Felt did not agree with Brown's objectives, however, reminding Washington that the established mission for the B–26s was to interdict the communist logistics chain, not close air support.<sup>44</sup>

At the White House, President Kennedy received an intelligence briefing that concluded that "communist forces in Laos are now close to complete military victory." McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor, recorded after a meeting on the 26th with senior State and Defense personnel that "in assessing the possible character of a large-scale involvement in Laos, the president was confronted with general agreement among his advisers that such a conflict would be unjustified, even if the loss of Laos must be accepted." Kennedy denied Brown's request for B–26 close air support, but he issued orders for Felt to move the SEATO task force (*see Apr. 20*) to within twelve hours' steaming time of Bangkok.<sup>45</sup>

During the meeting, Admiral Burke, acting as chairman of the Joint Chiefs with Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer on his way to Southeast Asia (*see May 2*), briefed a plan for the insertion of a multinational (but primarily U.S.) force at various points in Laos, the genesis of what became known as SEATO Plan 5 (*see July 28*). When Kennedy asked whether the United States could protect the few thousand men at the airfield in Vientiane, Burke replied that it might be necessary to strike Chinese airfields to assure troop safety. Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson recalled

<sup>42.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:78.

<sup>43.</sup> Bowers, Tactical Airlift, 441.

<sup>44.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 49–50; Rusk, So Much to Lose, 24; FRUS 1961–63, 24:139–40.

<sup>45.</sup> Rusk, So Much to Lose, 24-25 (1st quote); FRUS 1961-63, 24:138-39.

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that this exchange "very clearly fastened in the president's mind" the idea that a decision to intervene in Laos might be directly connected to one involving nuclear war with China.<sup>46</sup>

**April 27**: President Kennedy suspected there would not be public or international support for U.S. intervention in Laos, a thought confirmed by communication with foreign and U.S. congressional leaders on the 27th. Admiral Burke told members of Congress during a briefing at which the president presided that unless the United States was willing to intervene militarily in Laos, all of Southeast Asia would be lost. At the same time, he outlined the difficulty of conducting military operations in Laos and described a long war that might involve the Chinese (*see Apr. 26*). The congressional leaders acknowledged the potential consequences of the loss of Laos but were nearly unanimous in their opposition to the introduction of U.S. ground forces. There did seem to be "considerable support" for U.S. troops in Thailand and South Vietnam. Alexis Johnson thought this meeting was a "turning point" for Kennedy on the issue of intervention, although Walt Rostow believed that the president was still very close to authorizing deployment at the time of the cease-fire a week later (*see May 3*).<sup>47</sup>

**April 28**: Ted Sorensen, special counsel to the president, wrote a memorandum for Kennedy in which he expressed great skepticism about the program being proposed by the Vietnam task force (*see Apr. 20*). He thought the concepts depended too much on speculative and unreasonable expectations, including Diem actually carrying out reforms, support for his government increasing, and "unlikely Communist reactions." The document had "no timetable, no clear division of authority, no realistic estimate of long-run costs and effect, and too many miscellaneous ideas vaguely thrown in without any serious consideration." Sorensen wrote that "the outcome is highly doubtful" and concluded that "there is no clearer example of a country that cannot be saved unless it saves itself." Despite this level of skepticism from one of his most trusted confidants, Kennedy

<sup>46.</sup> U. Alexis Johnson, interview with William Burbeck, June 18, 1964, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 5–6, https://archive2.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Johnson,%20U.%20Alexis/JFKOH-UAJ-01/JFKOH-UAJ-01-TR.pdf. Johnson wondered in his memoir two decades later whether Burke and the Joint Chiefs were actually trying to avoid involvement in another war in Asia by presenting such over-the-top scenarios. Johnson, *Right Hand of Power*, 323. General LeMay continued to believe that bombing China might be necessary to prevent that country from intervening in Vietnam as it had in Korea. Williams, *LeMay on Vietnam*, 21.

<sup>47.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:146–47; Johnson interview, 7–8 (1st quote); Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 323–24 (2d quote); Jacobs, Universe Unraveling, 235–39. The congressional leaders also expressed concern about Laotian resolve, an issue the U.S. media had been covering more explicitly (see Apr. 21). According to Rostow, the only member of Congress among those present who was willing to consider U.S. troop deployment to Laos was Sen. H. Styles Bridges (R–N.H.). Rostow interview (1964), 77.

approved most of the task force recommendations (*see Apr. 29*), which became the basis for U.S. policy in Vietnam (*see May 11, Oct. 13*).<sup>48</sup>

**April 29**: Prior to the scheduled NSC meeting, most of the national security principals besides the president met to discuss the options in Laos. Secretary McNamara questioned whether the United States could insert troops in Vientiane, noting the possibilities of Chinese air retaliation, local sabotage, and Pathet Lao guerrilla activity. Admiral Burke observed that "war is dangerous" and stated that the United States should intervene nevertheless. He believed that "each time you give ground, it is harder to stand next time. If we give up Laos, we would have to put U.S. forces into Vietnam and Thailand."<sup>49</sup>

Gen. George Decker, the Army chief of staff, said that "we cannot win a conventional war in Southeast Asia; if we go in, we should go in to win, and that means bombing Hanoi, China, and maybe even using nuclear bombs." Attorney General Robert Kennedy said that "we would look sillier than we do now if we got troops in there and then backed down." He asked whether the United States could accomplish its purposes in Laos from the air. General LeMay said it could, but McNamara thought such a scenario would have to involve nuclear weapons. LeMay believed that B–26s and F–100s could "knock out a big wad of supplies" before they reached the Pathet Lao. If China intervened, LeMay thought "we should go to work on China itself and let Chiang [Kai-shek] take Hainan Island." LeMay did not think the communists would agree to a cease-fire in Laos without military action.<sup>50</sup>

Robert Kennedy asked whether South Vietnam and Thailand could be held if Laos fell to the communists. McNamara and Burke agreed that it would take a greater effort to hold them if Laos were lost.<sup>51</sup>

At the following NSC meeting that same morning, the president made no decisions on military involvement in Laos as attendees considered both military and diplomatic options.<sup>52</sup> Kennedy did, however, approve Phoumi's request to equip Lao T–6s with bombs. After receiving word of the president's decision, Ambassador Brown protested to Secretary Rusk that using T–6s for bombing would be "wholly ineffective" and would jeopardize chances for a cease-fire. The ambassador took matters into his

48. Ted Sorensen, Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History (New York: Harper, 2008), 355.

<sup>49.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:151.

<sup>50.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:152–53. Col. Harry Coleman, the senior air advisor in Laos, also thought that tactical nuclear weapons would need to be used. When he made the mistake of sharing this opinion with a UN official from Greece, he received a rebuke through channels from the PACAF commander, Gen. Emmett O'Donnell, on whose staff he had served before deploying: "Zipper your lip, you dope." Coleman interview, 61–62.

<sup>51.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:153-54.

<sup>52.</sup> Ibid., 24:154-55. There is no full memorandum of discussion concerning Laos.



A Douglas AD–6 Skyraider at Bien Hoa. These planes, later redesignated AD–1Hs, became the primary fighter aircraft for the VNAF during this period. Even with the new airframe, the 1st Fighter Squadron flew only 251 combat sorties across all of 1961. *USAF.* 

own hands, driving to the flight line at Wattay and ordering Capt. Ronald G. Shaw, a USAF maintenance officer assigned to the Lao air force, to offload the bombs, much to the consternation of the Lao officers.<sup>53</sup>

At the same April 29 NSC meeting, Kennedy approved several of the measures recommended by Gilpatric's Vietnam task force (*see Apr. 20*), including expanding the MAAG by around 100 advisors and committing to build a heavy radar facility near Da Nang. Discussion of the MAAG increase continued for two more weeks and resulted in the deployment of 400 U.S. Special Forces (*see May 5, 11*).<sup>54</sup>

**April 30**: To the surprise of U.S. officials, Kong Le proposed that military leaders of the warring parties in Laos meet under a flag of truce just south of Vang Vieng to discuss a cease-fire (*see Apr. 16, 24, May 3*). Secretary Rusk, with approval from President Kennedy, told Ambassador Brown to advise Phoumi to accept the invitation. Washington had expected a Kong Le/Pathet Lao advance toward Vientiane, but the march southward would have lengthened Kong's supply line and brought his troops into open ground, vulnerable to the B–26s and whatever additional air assets that might have been brought to bear.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 50–51. Anthony and Sexton (p. 53) note that the cease-fire on May 3 took effect before the T–6s flew any bombing missions.

<sup>54.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 68; FRUS 1961–63, 1:88; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:90. There is no full memorandum of discussion from this meeting.

<sup>55.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:159; Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 51.

**May**: The United States delivered twenty-five AD–6s for the VNAF, bringing the total supplied to thirty-one (*see Sept. 23, 1960*). There were only five airfields in South Vietnam out of which the VNAF could fly, however. Of these facilities, only Bien Hoa, the operational home of the VNAF 1st Fighter Squadron, was an actual air base, albeit with a steel plank runway that could not handle larger aircraft. The others were either commercial airports, such as Tan Son Nhut on the outskirts of Saigon, or very basic airstrips. At all the airfields, including Bien Hoa, the VNAF had poor maintenance facilities and an inefficient logistics chain, resulting in high aircraft out-of-commission rates. The 1st Fighter Squadron logged only 251 combat sorties for all of 1961.<sup>56</sup>

Even when it could get planes airworthy, the VNAF had little cooperation from the ARVN. During this period, the VNAF had to provide air control for 90 percent of its fighter missions, primarily carried out by observers in L–19s, or fly without any forward air control. Approval for air strikes had to come from the province chief, the regional commander, the joint general staff, and sometimes from Diem himself. In many cases, Diem insisted that government observers mark targets before bombing. Approval sometimes took days or even weeks to obtain after ARVN intelligence had located potential targets. These rules of engagement made it virtually impossible for the VNAF to have any impact against PLAF guerrilla operations.<sup>57</sup>

Maj. Gen. Theodore Milton, who assumed command of Thirteenth Air Force in mid-1961, observed that the VNAF was "a little peanut outfit in Vietnam at that time." The ARVN, with numerous three-star and two-star generals, was "so clearly the dominant force." Although the VNAF technically had been designated a separate service in 1960, its overall commander was a colonel, and it remained subservient to the ARVN in every way.<sup>58</sup>

The VNAF did have, in some of its squadrons, a number of good pilots who had logged a significant number hours. According to Lt. Col. Robert L. Gleason of the 4400th CCTS, however, "they were trained by the French in more ways than one." He observed that they "lived the good life, stayed close to the big cites, and fought the war casually, much like a French colonial operation." Col. Benjamin King of the 4400th CCTS noted how VNAF pilots took a "siesta" every day, even if intelligence or

<sup>56.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 55; 2d ADVON History, November 1961–October 1962, 1:3; Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 28; Mikesh, Flying Dragons, 42.

<sup>57.</sup> Theodore R. Milton, "Air Power: Equalizer in Southeast Asia," *Air University Review* 25 (Nov.–Dec. 1963): 4; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 55; King interview, 84–85. According to Colonel King (pp. 77, 84), the VNAF eventually developed its own intelligence channels and started flying without waiting for ARVN approval.

<sup>58.</sup> Milton interview, 84-85 (quotes); Ky, Buddha's Child, 47.



President Kennedy with W. Averell Harriman in March 1961. Kennedy had appointed Harriman as ambassador at large in January, with his primary emphasis on the deteriorating situation in Laos. After the cease-fire there, Harriman became the lead negotiator for the United States at the peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland, that began on May 16. *Kennedy Library*.

the ARVN dictated a mission. According to Gleason, "They saw no need to deploy to forward austere bases, fly at night, or respond to every request for air support from ARVN ground units."<sup>59</sup>

**May 1**: Ambassador Averell Harriman cabled President Kennedy and Secretary Rusk that in his conversations with Phoumi, as well as with the Laotian king and prime minister, "each one made it quite plain that he considered [the] military situation now beyond the Lao capacity to control." Harriman added that "if agreement could be reached in SEATO for united positive action, it might check [the] advance and speed [a] cease-fire."<sup>60</sup>

At an NSC meeting later that day, Secretary McNamara proposed that a SEATO military force move into the panhandle of Laos, including the part of the country adjacent to South Vietnam. CIA director Allen Dulles said that the United States would have to anticipate a Chinese response to such a thrust, a point that General Decker, the Army chief of staff, reiterated. Maxwell Taylor, the president's unofficial military advisor,

<sup>59.</sup> Gleason, *Air Commando Chronicles*, 41; King interview, 62–63, 75 (quote), 82–83, 86. In *Buddha's Child*, Lt. Col. Nguyen Cao Ky included numerous examples of the "good life" he was living as a VNAF transport pilot at Bien Hoa, including almost-daily flights to visit his mistress.

<sup>60.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:165.

opposed U.S. troops in Laos, while Secretary Rusk observed that the United States would risk the deterioration of alliances if it did not provide SEATO support to Laos. McNamara added that winning a war in Southeast Asia might require the use of nuclear weapons. The assemblage agreed that the Joint Chiefs would prepare a presentation for another NSC meeting the next day that would outline various scenarios and potential military implications (*see May 2*). President Kennedy said he would find out the attitudes of the British and the French. He also indicated that he would be prepared to deploy U.S. forces to Thailand under certain conditions.<sup>61</sup>

On the same date, John Kenneth Galbraith, the U.S. ambassador to India and a Kennedy confidant, telegraphed the president from New Delhi that "as a military ally, the entire Laos nation is clearly inferior to a battalion of conscientious objectors from World War I." He added that "we get nothing from their support, and I must say I wonder what the communists get."<sup>62</sup>

**May 2**: General Lemnitzer visited Saigon, where he met with Diem and senior MAAG and U.S. embassy personnel, as well as with Ambassador Harriman. Lemnitzer cabled the Joints Chiefs that "we are facing a repetition of the unhappy sequence of events in Laos . . . which can only lead to the loss of Vietnam." He told his colleagues that "if I correctly understood the expressed views of top government officials before I left Washington, I gathered that we do intend to take whatever action is required to save Vietnam." In the meeting with Diem, which included Harriman, Diem stated that Laos had to be saved at all costs, as its loss would allow for mass infiltration into South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese.<sup>63</sup>

Lemnitzer also informed the Joint Chiefs that he had concluded from his stop in Vientiane that Phoumi's Royal Lao Army was "falling apart." He recommended immediate intervention by SEATO troops, even if not all SEATO member countries agreed. Ambassador Brown recalled in a 1968 interview that he told Lemnitzer and Harriman that "before you use force, look down the road all the way and be prepared to go all the way. If you don't like what you see, don't do it." He thought the United States should "carefully consider the consequences," not "take steps and then be in a position where you then have to decide what you're going to do."<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61.</sup> Ibid., 24:162-64.

<sup>62.</sup> Jacobs, Universe Unraveling, 240.

<sup>63.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:89–91; 126–28 (1st quote, 126; 2d quote, 128). On the same date, the Joint Chiefs, with Kennedy's approval, sent a message to Admiral Felt authorizing what the CINCPAC history described as "five military actions" that were "intended to stiffen South Vietnamese resistance." None of these was detailed in the document. CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:172.

<sup>64.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:170; Brown interview, 20 (quotes). Harriman telegraphed Kennedy and Rusk with his concurrence on Lemitzer's observations. *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:172.



President Kennedy with civilian leaders of the military in March 1961: Secretary of the Navy John B. Connally Jr.; Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric; Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara; Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson; Secretary of the Army Elvis J. Stahr Jr.; and Secretary of the Air Force Eugene M. Zuckert. *Kennedy Library*.

A chaotic NSC meeting ensued in Washington on the afternoon of May 2. According to Arthur Schlesinger, President Kennedy "was appalled at the sketchy nature of American military planning for Laos—the lack of detail and the unanswered questions." The Joint Chiefs were so divided in their opinions that Vice President Johnson suggested that they put their positions in writing. They also had no answers when Kennedy asked how the United States was going to get out if it intervened, or how many other communist countries the United States might have to bomb if it used nuclear weapons on the Pathet Lao (*see Apr. 26, 27, May 1*).<sup>65</sup>

Secretary McNamara collected the Joint Chiefs' memoranda and contributed one of his own, as did the Air Force and Army secretaries. All that the service chiefs concurred on was a forty-eight-hour ultimatum to reach a cease-fire; the military response if the Pathet Lao demurred varied in intensity. General Decker of the Army, Admiral Burke of the Navy, and Army secretary Elvis J. Stahr Jr. all wanted U.S. and SEATO troops, with U.S. air and naval support, to be positioned immediately in Thailand for deployment into Laotian population centers if the Pathet Lao did not cooperate. Gen. Thomas White of the Air Force, Gen. David Shoup of the

<sup>65.</sup> Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 337–38 (quote); Sorensen, Kennedy, 645; FRUS 1961–63, 24:171; Rostow interview (1964), 46–47, 79–81.

Marines—whose troops would have been the leading ground element and Air Force secretary Eugene M. Zuckert all favored aerial response but no ground troops. White wrote that ground intervention in Laos would be "maldeployment." He carried bombing scenarios farther than the others, with attacks on Pathet Lao supply centers and military concentrations in the first round, then a move to strike Hanoi if the communists did not accept the cease-fire. White conceded that bombing North Vietnam might bring China into the war, but he believed Chinese intervention in Southeast Asia was "inevitable" if the United States took decisive action in Laos.<sup>66</sup>

McNamara and Roswell Gilpatric concluded their joint memorandum by writing that "after weighing the pros and cons set forth above, we favor the 'Intervention Course."<sup>67</sup>

Walt Rostow described the "disarray" of the whole ordeal and called the Pentagon's response a "dreadful performance," leaving the president with "a mess."<sup>68</sup>

**May 3**: Just after midnight Washington time, Secretary Rusk cabled Ambassador Brown that the administration had received word that the Pathet Lao had agreed to a cease-fire, to take effect on the 3d, as the Soviets and British had advised (*see Apr. 24*). Rusk told Brown to counsel Phoumi and the Boun Oum government "to cooperate without raising complicating issues on picayune details." The secretary added that while the American contingent should be alert for indications of bad faith by the communists, the information the administration had received from Moscow suggested that the cease-fire was legitimate. The Pathet Lao did, however, move on the morning of the 3d to secure an area in southern Laos that later became a major staging and supply post along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Kong Le had the troops under his command in the Vang Vieng area stand down on the 3d while the parties finalized the cease-fire.<sup>69</sup>

Details about what prompted the communists to accept a cease-fire are sketchy. Walt Rostow believed that word of 10,000 U.S. Marines on Okinawa making preparations in case called upon to deploy led the Soviets to tell the Pathet Lao to stand down. He said that several times during the Vienna summit a month later (*see June 3–4*), Khrushchev said to Kennedy, "You were going into Laos, weren't you?"<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:169-70.

<sup>67.</sup> Ibid., 24:166-69 (quote, 169).

<sup>68.</sup> Rostow interview (1964), 79.

<sup>69.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:171 (quote), 174; Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 51, 53.

<sup>70.</sup> Rostow interview (1964), 77–78. Rostow stated (p. 78) that he was "sure this was the beginning of the turnaround in the relations between Khrushchev and Kennedy—the loading of the Marines from Okinawa. I think that was the beginning of the turning point. I think that Khrushchev realized that Kennedy would not take the loss of the Mekong valley. I think he was right, despite what appeared to be a bluff. I think Kennedy would have fought if they [the Pathet Lao] had continued into the valley."



Prospects for the Royal Lao Army were not good if the cease-fire did not hold. Brown reported on the 3d that the anticommunist Laotian force "is fast approaching ineffectiveness both for offensive and defensive action against the enemy," was demoralized, and had exhausted its reserve units. Phoumi, who was having "periodic fits of deep depression," had begun making evacuation plans for Vientiane and other larger towns in the vicinity, with an aim to consolidate the government and his remaining forces much farther south in Savannakhet.<sup>71</sup>

When Arthur Schlesinger returned to the White House on May 3 after a trip to Europe, President Kennedy held up cables from General Lemnitzer and the Joint Chiefs' memoranda (*see May 2*) and said, "If it hadn't been for Cuba, we might be about to intervene in Laos," adding that "I might have taken this advice seriously." Still, the president came perilously close to having to order some form of action in Laos. He told Rostow that while Eisenhower had been able to withstand the political consequences of Dien Bien Phu, "I can't take a 1954 defeat today." Rostow stated in 1964 that he believed Kennedy would have sent troops. But the cease-fire held, ICC representatives arrived in Laos within a week to verify the cessation of conflict, and attention turned to the upcoming international conference on Laos (*see May 16*).<sup>72</sup>

The situation in Laos remained unstable as the Geneva talks dragged on for more than a year, with no agreement reached until July 23, 1962. U.S./SEATO military options remained in play to keep the country from completely falling to the communists or to interdict North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam, but March–April 1961 proved to be the peak of the crisis. The Pathet Lao did continue operations against the Hmong ethnic group that had supported the anticommunist forces (*see Feb.* 8), claiming to the ICC that they were just securing areas that had already been liberated. Col. Harry Coleman said ICC efforts in Laos were "completely ineffectual," leaving the Canadian officers there as part of the ICC team "quite disgusted with the manner in which it was operating."<sup>73</sup>

Historian George Herring observed that "more than anything else, the decision to negotiate in Laos led the [Kennedy] administration to reevaluate its policy in Vietnam. Along with its refusal to send U.S. aircraft or troops to salvage the Bay of Pigs operation, its unwillingness to intervene militarily in Laos appeared to increase the symbolic importance of taking firm stands elsewhere." Senior CIA official Richard Bissell wrote that "it is my feeling the president chose to take a stand in Vietnam and not Laos because he believed a local victory in Laos would be meaningless unless we could win in Vietnam. A victory in Vietnam, pacifying the country

<sup>71.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:173-74.

<sup>72.</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 339 (quotes); Rostow interview (1964), 54, 77–78; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 644–45; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 53–54. For an assessment of the multiple reasons behind Kennedy's decision to accept the cease-fire and neutralization of Laos, see Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 250–54.

<sup>73.</sup> Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 53–54; Coleman interview, 69 (quotes). For the subsequent period through the Geneva settlement, see Rusk, *So Much to Lose*, 37–150; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 254–70; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 61–85.


The "space race" against the Soviet Union was one of several areas of indirect engagement in play while the Kennedy administration considered its next steps in Laos and Vietnam. On May 5, the senior brain trust watched the liftoff of astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr. on a small television in the president's secretary's office. From left: U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy; McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor; Vice President Johnson; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., special assistant to the president; Adm. Arleigh Burke, acting chairman of the Joint Chiefs; President Kennedy; and First Lady Jacqueline B. Kennedy. *Kennedy Library*.

under a friendly government, would make Laos almost irrelevant." Bissell noted in retrospect his belief that Kennedy's decision was "entirely valid, but it presupposed that we *were* going to win in Vietnam."<sup>74</sup>

**May 4**: At a Vietnam task force meeting, Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric wondered aloud whether communist representatives at the approaching Geneva conference on Laos (*see May 16*) might attempt to institute a freeze on military personnel in Southeast Asia, as had been done in the 1954 accords on Vietnam. His comment intensified debate on whether the United States should send troops to Vietnam. Walt Rostow, representing the Office of the President, said that such an intervention could range from a few hundred men to aid with counterinsurgency efforts

<sup>74.</sup> Herring, America's Longest War, 93–94; Bissell, Reflections of a Cold Warrior, 148–49. See also Jacobs, Universe Unraveling, 4–20; Roger Hilsman's comments in Charlton and Moncrieff, Many Reasons Why, 64; and Walt Rostow's in Diffusion of Power, 268. Senior CIA official Chester Cooper recounted that "according to those close to him at the time, Diem was so convinced of the importance of Vietnam to the U.S. and to the rest of the free world that he was sure the Americans were disengaging from Laos to concentrate on Vetnam." Cooper, Lost Crusade, 176.

(see May 11) all the way up to a force of a size that might prompt a military response from China. The senior representative of the Joint Staff, Maj. Gen. Charles H. Bonesteel III, USA, said the Joint Chiefs had assessed potential deployments "in terms of the Lao situation" but "not specifically" to Vietnam. Both Bonesteel and William Colby, the CIA station chief in Vietnam, expressed doubts that U.S. troops could effectively seal South Vietnam's 1,500-mile land border with Laos and Cambodia. Kenneth T. Young, the U.S. ambassador to Thailand, asked what the point would be to "pour hundreds of millions into Vietnam if we can't choke off the problem" of communist infiltration. Bonesteel replied that if the United States intended to prevent "communist domination of Vietnam," such an objective would require "very sizeable force commitments." After more discussion. Bonesteel said that the Joint Chiefs "would need as clear a statement of the real national intent as possible" from the administration "in order to give clear policy guidance concerning the commitment of forces." Although Gilpatric concluded that the pending task force report should concentrate on "whatever was necessary to meet the insurgency problem," he stated that the committee would also consider larger deployment options. To that end, the task force forwarded the final draft of its report to the Joint Chiefs the following Monday (see May 8).75

Also on May 4, President Kennedy broached the subject of intervention with Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. After the meeting, Fulbright told the press that the administration "was considering the possibility of direct military intervention" in South Vietnam and Thailand "to counteract Communist threats" from North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao. Fulbright said he was against a U.S. deployment to Laos but was open to sending troops to South Vietnam or Thailand if leaders of those countries wanted them. On the same date, Secretary Rusk noted at a news conference how communist progress in Laos had increased the threat to South Vietnam. He suggested that the United States would have to consider expanding its aid to the South Vietnamese but did not specify how it might be accomplished (*see May 5, 11*).<sup>76</sup>

**May 5**: At an NSC meeting, Secretary Rusk argued that if the United States put troops in Vietnam, their presence could complicate the position of the noncommunist countries at the approaching Geneva conference on Laos (*see May 16*). At a follow-up meeting, Rusk acquiesced to expansion

<sup>75.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:115–23 (quotes, 118–19); Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:91–92; Buzzanco, Masters of War, 95–96.

<sup>76. &</sup>quot;Fulbright Hints US Weighs Use of Troops in Asia," *New York Times*, May 5, 1961, 1 (quotes); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 72.

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of the MAAG by up to 100 uniformed personnel (*see Apr. 29*) but still asserted that combat forces should not be sent to Vietnam (*see May 4, 11*).<sup>77</sup>

At a press conference on the same day, President Kennedy announced that he was sending Vice President Johnson on "a special fact-finding mission to Asia" (*see May 11–13*), which the administration had been planning since mid-April. The president sidestepped a question about U.S. troops for South Vietnam. Kennedy did have some good news from earlier in the day to discuss with the media, the first U.S. manned space flight, by astronaut Alan B. Shepard Jr.<sup>78</sup>

Also on May 5, the first aircraft modified for use by the newly formed 4400th CCTS (*see Apr. 14*) arrived at Hurlburt Field. The unit had received its full complement of thirty-two planes by July 1.<sup>79</sup>

**May 6**: The Vietnam task force forwarded a draft of its final report, "A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam," to the White House.<sup>80</sup>

**May 8**: The Vietnam task force asked the Joint Chiefs to review its draft report (*see May 6*) and consider "the possible commitment of U.S. forces to Vietnam," the "military advisability of such an action, as well as . . . the size and composition of such U.S. forces." The service chiefs indicated their approval of the report's military recommendations on the 9th. On May 10, Admiral Burke, the acting chairman with General Lemnitzer still in Asia (*see May 2*), wrote Secretary McNamara that it was the opinion of the Joint Chiefs that U.S. forces "should be deployed immediately to South Vietnam." The service chiefs thought it would be better to insert troops at that stage rather than to have to deploy them later "into an already existing combat situation."<sup>81</sup>

May 10: Frederick Nolting presented his credentials as the new ambassador to South Vietnam to Diem (*see Jan. 28*). Nolting later stated that "the new element in my instructions was to get this thing on a firm footing, to get a rapport between the two partners, to create confidence in each other's motives." Historian Michael R. Adamson concluded that the Kennedy administration sent the new ambassador "under the assumption that gaining Diem's confidence was the key to the breakthrough [in Vietnam] it sought." In taking the tactful approach, however, "Nolting reduced the amount of leverage that Washington may have exerted over Diem."

<sup>77.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:125; U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:67; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:93.

<sup>78.</sup> Public Papers, 1961, 353, 354 (quote), 356, 358, 361-62.

<sup>79.</sup> Kissling, Air Commando and Special Operations Chronology, 5.

<sup>80.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:93-94; for the report, see U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:138-54.

<sup>81.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:131 (1st-2d quotes); Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:89 (3d-4th quotes).



Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting Jr. greeting Adm. Harry Felt, the CINCPAC, in Saigon. Nolting, a veteran diplomat who had no previous experience in Asia, served as ambassador to South Vietnam from May 1961 until August 1963. Unlike his predecessor, he developed close relationships with Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu and only gently prodded them to make governmental reforms. *USN*.

CIA official Chester Cooper observed that "although Diem and Nhu were pleased with the new ambassador, Nolting was no more successful than Durbrow in getting Saigon to undertake meaningful governmental reforms." As Saigon-based journalist Robert Shaplen put it, "Trying to persuade Diem and Nhu to do things in a more polite way was simply a further lesson in futility." Cooper noted that by the end of Nolting's ambassadorial assignment in 1963, his "reputation as a friend of Nhu was so well established that no Vietnamese would speak critically of the regime with an American official for fear it would be reported back to Nhu."<sup>82</sup>

82. Futrell Chron., 8; Nolting interview (1966), 4 (1st quote); Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 230 (2d quote), 248–49 (3d quote); Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 175 (4th and 6th quotes); Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 149 (5th quote); Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 76–78. For extended comments from Nolting largely defending Diem, see Frederick E. Nolting Jr., interview with Maj. Richard B. Clement and James C. Hasdorff, November 9, 1971, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 00904449 (hereafter Nolting interview [1971]). For his thoughts on Nhu, who he described as a "man of strong character" who was "more liberal than his brother" but also "more authoritarian," see Nolting interview (1966), 8–9. According to Adamson (p. 249), "Kennedy and his advisers may have hoped that increased commitments to Diem would induce him to reform in the manner that Durbrow had urged, but Nolting's behavior gave Diem no reason to feel that Washington expected him to reform his regime." Adamson (p. 252) concluded that while gaining Diem's confidence, Nolting "contributed to the failure of the Kennedy administration to meet its goal of persuading the South Vietnamese president to broaden his base of political support and improve his regime's ability to counter the communist insurgency. This was one of the unintended consequences of the administration's change in tactical approach" from how Durbrow had dealt with Diem.

As Walt Rostow wrote in a memorandum for the president on the same date, the new ambassador "must make a college try at reconciling Diem and his army," at least "for the time being." Rostow had begun his text by observing that "although we have no alternative except to support Diem now, he may be overthrown." Cooper said that Kennedy "was in a chronic state of vacillation as to whether to support Diem or let him fall."83

Nolting was surprised by how much more attention the Pentagon seemed to be paying to the situation in Vietnam than his own agency was. He stated in 1970 that "it was a puzzle to me why the State Department, throughout my tour of duty out there, abdicated as much as it did to the Department of Defense." He noted that once Secretary McNamara became involved in Vietnam-related issues in the latter part of 1961, he was "in Vietnam or met with us in Honolulu every month for two years. Dean Rusk never set foot in the place nor in Honolulu to talk about this." Even when he visited Washington, Nolting found it difficult to engage Rusk about his mission. The ambassador thought the situation in Vietnam when he arrived was "more political and economic and social than it was military," and therefore more in the lane of the State Department than the Pentagon.<sup>84</sup>

May 11: With President Kennedy's approval, the administration issued National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 52, which spelled out the proposals from the Vietnam task force it was implementing (see Apr. 20, May 6, 8). Despite the resistance General Lansdale encountered from the State Department, the final document incorporated nearly all of his military recommendations as well has his primary political one: that U.S. representatives work to build a better relationship with Diem. Provisions adopted included expansion of the MAAG (see Apr. 29) and additional support for the Civil Guard. The document also called for an assessment on the feasibility of expanding the South Vietnamese military by 30,000 men and directed the Defense Department to survey force requirements should deployment to Vietnam prove necessary (see May 17). Ambassador Nolting tried to closely adhere to the plan in NSAM 52, later stating that "it was, in effect, our bible for our mission during the next two and a half years."85

83. FRUS 1961-63, 1:131; Cooper, Lost Crusade, 176. Nolting said in 1966 that "there were, from the beginning, certain elements in the Department of State . . . who thought we'd never make it with the Diem government. But that group had been thoroughly squelched by the original task force report and by subsequent progress made in Vietnam. My instructions were, in effect, that internal politics, in the sense of who was going to rule the country, was out of our domain, that we were going to stick with whoever was elected." Nolting interview (1966), 17. 84. Nolting interview (1970), 35–38 (quotes, 36).

85. FRUS 1961-63, 1:87, 92-115, 132-34, 140-43; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:94; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 246-47; Nolting interview (1966), 2 (quote). The Joint Chiefs already had cabled Admiral Felt on May 9 for his thoughts on the potential deployment of combat troops to Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs sent Felt details of a prospective plan on May 11. CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:184-85.

As part of MAAG expansion, Kennedy approved the task force recommendation of covert deployment of 400 U.S. Army Special Forces to South Vietnam, primarily to organize South Vietnamese irregulars in the border areas where there was communist infiltration. Such an operation required USAF support. While it was a small step in terms of personnel, it was a significant one in the progression of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. State Department official William Bundy, brother of the national security advisor, later wrote that "although some have suggested that Kennedy was reluctant in this early decision, this was certainly not the mood of his advisors nor the mood that he conveyed to them. Rather, the tone was: 'Sure, Diem is difficult, but this one has got to be tackled.'" Secretary Rusk observed that "as far as I know, this was the first time the United States went above the [Geneva-imposed] 685-man limit, but since North Vietnam was already violating the agreements and we had not signed them, we didn't feel bound by them.'<sup>86</sup>

**May 11–13**: Vice President Johnson visited Saigon as part of a May 9–27 tour of Asia, with his party of more than fifty traveling on two USAF aircraft. In speeches and comments, Johnson compared Diem to George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill. Johnson delivered a letter to Diem from President Kennedy that promised increased funding for the ARVN and the Civil Guard. Diem responded that he wanted to go farther than what Kennedy was proposing, including an expansion of the ARVN by 100,000 men, a line of thinking that Johnson encouraged. The vice president asked Diem about his expectations for direct participation by U.S. combat forces. Diem replied that he would want U.S. troops only in the case of a North Vietnamese invasion. This was the answer Kennedy wanted.<sup>87</sup>

Johnson wrote in his trip report that the "situation in Viet Nam is more stable than is indicated by newspaper and other reports reaching Washington in recent weeks." He blamed "journalistic sensationalism" and the narrow perspectives of the U.S. embassy staff for what he called the "distorted" view. The vice president concluded that "the existing government in Saigon is the only realistic alternative to Viet Minh control in South Viet Nam." As Kennedy had hoped, the trip made Johnson more committed to the effort in Vietnam, and to using his considerable influence with Congress to rally support for it.<sup>88</sup>

Gibbons, U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 2:40–41 (1st quote); Rusk, As I Saw It, 431 (2d quote); Futrell, Advisory Years, 69–70; Adamson, "Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy," 247.
87. Miller, Misalliance, 226; Kaiser, American Tragedy, 73–74; FRUS 1961–63, 1:135–57; Shulimson,

JCS and Vietnam, 1:95–96. For Kennedy's letter to Diem, see U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:132–35. 88. FRUS 1961–63, 1:152–57 (quotes); Gibbons, U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 2:41–43.



Vice President Lyndon Johnson meeting with South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon in May 1961. Johnson praised Diem publicly and wrote a positive trip report encouraging greater support for the existing government. Privately, the vice president found Diem to be remote and surrounded by questionable characters. USAF.

Chester Cooper recorded that Johnson's report "crystallized the administration's decision to cast its lot with Diem—warts, family, and all." According to Roger Hilsman at the State Department, Johnson observed some of the issues Cooper mentioned, as the vice president found Diem remote and surrounded by questionable characters. Nevertheless, Johnson was "extremely cordial" to Diem, his family, and senior government officials, according to Ambassador Nolthing, as well as "very forthright" and "very energetic." His trip encouraged the MAAG, as General McGarr, stated that Johnson's visit "put us on the map. It signaled the beginning of a real understanding in Washington of the situation here and its requirements."<sup>89</sup>

According to William Colby, the CIA station chief in Vietnam, "Diem took from Johnson's visit just what Johnson intended: the United States would back him at the highest level, and he could discount the antagonisms of the embassy and the press." Colby also noted how disinterested Johnson was in hearing the full story of the situation in Vietnam from the U.S. leadership there.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>89.</sup> Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 178 (1st quote); Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 420; Nolting interview (1966), 3 (2d–4th quotes); O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis (A Sequel)," 4 (5th quote).

<sup>90.</sup> Colby, Lost Victory, 97 (quote); Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:96.

While Diem was pleased with the promises from the new U.S. administration, the Hanoi government labeled Johnson's pledges of support as the beginning of a "new aggression" against the Vietnamese people and sent representatives to China a few weeks later as it formulated its next moves (*see June*).<sup>91</sup>

**May 16**: Two weeks after the cease-fire in Laos (*see May 3*), the International Conference on the Settlement of the Laotian Question convened in Geneva, Switzerland. Ambassador Harriman, the senior U.S. representative, came to favor a solution of "neutralizing" Laos, a position President Kennedy generally backed (*see June 3–4*). The negotiations dragged on for sixteen months, however, with no agreement until July 23, 1962. While the diplomats dickered, the Pathet Lao consolidated its positions in the country, and supplies for the NLF flowed down the still barely developed Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos with little interruption, despite U.S. protests (*see Sept. 15–17*).<sup>92</sup>

**May 17**: In preparing to respond to a request from the Joint Chiefs for estimated force requirements for a potential U.S. deployment in South Vietnam (*see May 11*), Admiral Felt consulted with his Pacific Command component commanders. Based on their input, Felt recommended one Army division, eight B–57s, four F–102s, and potentially two or three jet reconnaissance aircraft. On this date, Gen. Emmett "Rosie" O'Donnell, PACAF commander, wrote Felt to express his concerns about the airfield and ground facilities to support the USAF aircraft (*see May*). He said that only a few B–57s and F–102s would be able to operate out of Tan Son Nhut, and only for short periods. The CINCPAC Command History indicated that the Joint Chiefs took no further action on Felt's proposals.<sup>93</sup>

**May 20**: The State Department sent to the U.S. embassy in Saigon a thirtytwo-point outline of the "Presidential Program for Vietnam," which was intended to "prevent Communist domination of Vietnam by initiating, on an accelerated basis, a series of mutually supporting actions of a political, military, economic, psychological, and covert character, designed to create in that country a viable and increasingly democratic society and to keep

93. Futrell, Advisory Years, 69; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:185.

<sup>91.</sup> Miller, Misalliance, 226; Kaiser, American Tragedy, 73–74; Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 109 (quote); Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 112.

<sup>92.</sup> Cooper, Lost Crusade, 182–91. Cooper was the senior CIA representative on the U.S. delegation to this conference, as he had been to the one in 1954 that ended the First Indochina War. For the military situation in Laos following the cease-fire and ongoing covert U.S. involvement, see Anthony and Sexton, War in Northern Laos, 53–63; Ahern, Undercover Armies, 70–116. For extensive coverage of the Laos conference and its aftermath, see Rust, So Much to Lose, 1–171.



The CIA chose Lt. Col. Nguyen Cao Ky, an experienced C–47 pilot who had attended USAF Air Command and Staff College, to fly the first missions to insert personnel in North Vietnam in May and June 1961. This effort ended disastrously, with all of the agents captured. Ky rose to command the VNAF, then transitioned into government, later serving as prime minister and subsequently as vice president of South Vietnam. USAF.

Vietnam free." The document was the Vietnam Task Force's concept for implementing NSAM 52 (*see May 11*). It indicated approval for a U.S.-funded 20,000-man increase in the ARVN, with an additional 30,000-man augmentation under consideration. The new program also called for the installation, "as a matter of priority," of radar capability to detect communist supply and reconnaissance flights. Admiral Felt waited until

September, however, before he requested that the USAF provide a mobile radar detachment (*see Oct. 1*). The document indicated willingness to expand the MAAG "as necessary to insure the effective implementation of the military portion of the program," but it included no specific guidelines or limits. There was also a provision for the establishment of a facility in Vietnam to test new military technologies, which became the impetus for the Combat Development and Test Center (*see Apr. 12, Aug. 10*).<sup>94</sup>

Also on May 20, a French television interviewer asked President Kennedy if he intended "to establish a geographic limitation on communist penetration in Southeast Asia." Kennedy replied that "the danger in Southeast Asia—as we have seen in Laos and we see now in Vietnam—is not of overt aggression across boundary lines by foreign armies, but rather by the effective use of guerrillas." He stated that over the previous twelve months, the NLF had assassinated 2,000 government officials and 2,000 local police officers in South Vietnam. Kennedy said that "we will attempt to assist the governments which want to remain free to maintain themselves, but it's going to be a very hard and difficult road for us all in Southeast Asia."

**May 21**: General O'Donnell wrote General LeMay that if the United States directly intervened in Laos, he thought that the U.S. military would be able to fight a "small war" there with conventional weapons. An expanded conflict that included North Vietnam and perhaps China, however, would require a "truly massive increase" in U.S. air and ground forces.<sup>96</sup>

**May 26**: In a memorandum for the president, Walt Rostow wrote that "it is my view that the Vietnam situation is extremely dangerous to the peace, and that we must push on all fronts to force a deflation of that crisis before it builds to a situation like that in Laos." He told Kennedy that "if it comes to an open battle, the inhibitions on our going in will be less than in Laos; but the challenge to Russia and China will be even greater. Moreover, I fear what the strains of the current guerrilla battle may do to the political situation within Vietnam."<sup>97</sup>

May 27–28: Four months after President Kennedy first urged operations in North Vietnam (*see Jan. 28, Mar. 9*), the CIA launched an airborne infiltration effort among northern highland tribes. Through Air America,

<sup>94.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:140–43 (1st–2d quotes, 140; 3d–4th quotes, 141); CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:172–74.

<sup>95.</sup> *Public Papers*, *1961*, 420. 96. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 65.

<sup>97.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:157–58.

the CIA created Vietnamese Air Transport and provided it with a single, unmarked C–47. Lt. Col. Nguyen Cao Ky of VNAF, a future South Vietnamese prime minister, headed the unit, which drew personnel from VNAF's two transport squadrons. Ky flew the first mission out of Tan Son Nhut on May 27, refueled at Da Nang, and inserted four commandos in Ninh Binh Province early on the 28th. The North Vietnamese quickly rounded up all of these men, as they did agents Ky dropped in Quang Binh and Lai Chau Provinces during two flights in June. North Vietnamese counterintelligence opened communication with Saigon by way of captured equipment and lured Vietnamese Air Transport into a resupply flight on July 1, which the North Vietnamese ambushed and shot down. With its only aircraft gone and with all of its agents captured—Ky avoided this fate as he had gotten another pilot to fly because he had a date with a woman that evening—this unit spent the rest of the year regrouping and did not fly infiltration missions again until February 1962.<sup>98</sup>

**June**: North Vietnamese prime minister Pham Van Dong led a delegation to Beijing as Hanoi sought Chinese guidance in the wake of increasing U.S. support for South Vietnam (*see May 11–13*). Chairman Mao Zedong generally approved of the armed NLF efforts in the south, while Premier Zhou Enlai said the North Vietnamese should remain flexible and stressed "blending legal and illegal struggle and combining political and military approaches."<sup>99</sup>

**June 3–4**: President Kennedy met with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, Austria, his first in-person encounter with the Soviet leader. The summit did not go well for Kennedy, who believed Khrushchev tried to intimidate and embarrass him in the wake of the Bay of Pigs debacle (*see Apr. 17– 19*). According to one account, after his last meeting with Khrushchev on June 4, Kennedy told confidants that "now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place." Others who were there have disputed this statement. Although several sources have recorded that Khrushchev and Kennedy more or less agreed on the neutralization of Laos, State Department official Charles E. Bohlen, who was there, wrote that the Soviet leader "showed little interest" in the Geneva negotiations (*see May 16*). Chester Cooper, who was part of the U.S. delegation at Geneva, received the same information. Nevertheless, after the Vienna summit, Khrushchev did tell his Geneva negotiators to work toward a neutral solution. This development created more tension

<sup>98.</sup> Conboy and Andradé, Spies and Commados, 32-45; Ky, Buddha's Child, 53-63.

<sup>99.</sup> Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 112.

ION OF COL Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev at a meeting of the UN General Assembly in New York, September 1960. Khrushchev tried to intimidate President Kennedy the first time the two met, in June 1961 in Vienna, Austria. In the wake of this summit, Kennedy decided that the United States would have to make firmer stands against the Soviet Union in communist-contested areas around the world. Accounts differ on whether he mentioned Vietnam at this time. Library of Congress.

between the Soviets and the North Vietnamese, who were dependent on sympathetic leadership in Laos to allow free moment down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>100</sup>

Ambassador Harriman, who flew from Geneva to Vienna and met with the president during the summit, returned to Switzerland convinced that Kennedy supported neutralization. This impression led Harriman and other U.S. representatives to more directly engage Souvanna Phouma and his neutralist faction, to the consternation of many in the State Department. When Secretary Rusk questioned Harriman's relationship with Souvanna, Harriman replied that he worked directly for the president and was carrying out his wishes.101

100. David Halberstram, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Random House, 1972), 75-76 (1st quote); Charles E. Bohlen, Witness to History: 1929-1969 (New York: Norton, 1973), 480-82 (2d quote, 482); Kaiser, American Tragedy, 54-56; Dommen, Indochinese Experience, 428-30; Chester L. Cooper, In the Shadows of History: 50 Years Behind the Scenes of Cold War Diplomacy (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 185-86; Rust, So Much to Lose, 49-50; Strober and Strober, "Let Us Begin Anew," 355-59; Jacobs, Universe Unraveling, 266-68; Nguyen, Hanoi's War, 58. Hanoi found Beijing's position on Laos much more palatable than Moscow's. Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 107-11.

101. Cooper, In the Shadows of History, 186-87. McGeorge Bundy stated in a 1971 interview that "I'm pretty sure what Harriman did [at Geneva] is what President Kennedy wanted done," adding that "it is not true that Governor Harriman exceeded his instructions, in my judgment." Bundy interview, 43.



## 1961

**June 9**: In a letter of this date addressed to President Kennedy, Diem requested an expansion of the ARVN to 270,000 men, which was 100,000 more than the existing force of 150,000 plus the additional 20,000 to which the United States had already agreed (*see Jan. 4, Feb. 13, Apr. 11*). Diem estimated that the cost of standing up the extra units would come to \$175 million through the end of 1963, an expense he indicated that he expected the United States to pay. Diem also asked for more U.S. advisors than the 400 Special Forces already deploying (*see May 11*).<sup>102</sup>

**June 14**: Nguyen Dinh Thuan, the South Vietnamese secretary of state, presented Diem's June 9 letter to President Kennedy in Washington. Kennedy questioned Thuan on the necessity of force expansion and advised him to visit key Republican senators who could prove pivotal in securing funding for more personnel. The president told Thuan that he could expand the MAAG with more advisors for ARVN troops, but "this increase should be done quietly" in order not to indicate that the United States "did not intend to abide by the Geneva Accords," an interesting statement considering the deployment already underway of 400 U.S. Special Forces (*see May 11*).<sup>103</sup>

**June 16**: A team under the leadership of Eugene A. Staley, research director of the Stanford Research Institute, left for Saigon. The group was to survey the financial resources of the South Vietnamese government and assess its abilities to support projected military and social needs. The mission included members from the State and Treasury Departments as well as an Army colonel. This U.S. Special Financial Group partnered with a Vietnam Special Financial Group in making its assessment, which it completed by mid-July. The U.S. team's report did not include firm estimates and was vague about programs to recommend. Nevertheless, the document became the basis for several U.S. decisions in the summer and autumn, including the size of ARVN expansion to support (*see June 9, 14, 21, Aug. 4*).<sup>104</sup>

**June 21**: In response to Diem's June 9 request to expand the South Vietnamese military to 270,000 men, the Joint Chiefs countered with a recommendation of a 200,000-man force (*see June 9, 14, Aug. 3, 4*).<sup>105</sup>

**June 28**: In NSAM 56, the White House put in writing its desire that Secretary McNamara conduct an inventory of the "paramilitary assets"

<sup>102.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:167–73.

<sup>103.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:172-74.

<sup>104.</sup> Ibid., 1:179, 221–23, 259; Gibbons, U.S. Government and Vietnam, 2:51–52; Kattenburg, Vietnam Trauma, 109. For the report, see U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:182–226.

<sup>105.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:99.

in the U.S. military and consider how they could best be used around the world, both in training indigenous forces and in direct intervention.<sup>106</sup> The USAF was already in the process of standing up the 4400th CCTS for just such operations (*see Apr. 14*).

**June 29–30**: Gen. Phoumi Nosavan visited Washington. Although he was not the titular head of state for Laos, the administration treated him as such, arranging meetings with the president, Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, and members of the Joint Staff. Discussions centered on the Geneva conference (*see May 16*), prospective neutralization of Laos, and coordination of U.S. stances at Geneva with those of the Boun Oum/Phoumi noncommunist government the United States supported. Rusk laid out in stark terms Laos's role in the U.S. "confrontation throughout the world with the Sino-Soviet Bloc," a geopolitical situation on everyone's mind as Soviet threats to take West Berlin increased. Rusk stated that "a decision in regard to Laos might well mean a decision in regard to World War III."<sup>107</sup>

President Kennedy told Phoumi that the United States was "anxious to have a government that would maintain Lao neutrality and independence." Phoumi asked the president for his views on a potential government headed by Souvanna. Kennedy replied that such an administration would have to be considered as a "whole package," looking at the roles of Phoumi associates and whether Souvanna would accept Phoumi as defense minister. He added that the British and French "look more hopefully on Souvanna to maintain neutrality than others do." Kennedy told Phoumi that "we cannot get everything we want in Laos," and that they were not in a position "to resolve the situation by purely military means." He said that the United States and its allies would "seek the best arrangement [in Laos] we can obtain."<sup>108</sup>

Privately, Kennedy thought Phoumi was a "total shit," but during his meeting with the Laotian general, the president compared him to Talleyrand.<sup>109</sup>

**June 30**: Gen. Curtis LeMay succeeded Gen. Thomas White as USAF chief of staff. LeMay would play a significant role in shaping USAF response to the growing crisis in Southeast Asia.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>106.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:174.

<sup>107.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:273-82 (quotes, 277).

<sup>108.</sup> Ibid., 24:283-86 (quotes, 284-85); Kaiser, American Tragedy, 79-80.

<sup>109.</sup> Kaiser, American Tragedy, 84.

<sup>110.</sup> For LeMay's appointment and his involvement in preparing the Air Force for Vietnam, see Williams, *LeMay on Vietnam*, 1–17.



President Kennedy arriving at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, on October 12 on his way to review U.S. Special Forces at Fort Bragg. Col. Arthur P. Hurr, USAF, acting commander of 464th Troop Carrier Wing (Assault), had the honor of welcoming the president. Brig. Gen. Chester V. "Ted" Clifton Jr., USA, military aide to the president, is on the stairs. *Kennedy Library*.

# A Turn for the Worse in Vietnam July–October 1961

After the summer rainy season ended, the situation in South Vietnam worsened more than the U.S. government had anticipated as indigenous insurgent activities increased ten-fold in September. The majority of U.S. officials mistakenly blamed infiltration through Laos, leading the administration to consider deploying troops into Laos or along the Laotian border in South Vietnam. As autumn arrived, Vietnam truly was the problem that the John Kennedy administration had already declared it to be in the spring and summer.

As policy makers searched for options, Gen. Curtis LeMay, the new USAF chief of staff, took the opportunity to lobby for deployment of the Air Force's newly created air commando unit, the 4400th CCTS, already known as Jungle Jim. While he sought approval from the Joint Chiefs and the secretary of defense, the 4400th CCTS commander, Col. Benjamin King, visited Pacific Command and MAAG-Vietnam to determine how the unit's capabilities could be used, and to identify a potential base of operations. President Kennedy approved deployment of a detachment while King was in Vietnam.

The administration was considering larger-scale options at the same time, and at the same October meeting, the president authorized sending two of his senior aides, Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow, to survey the situation in person. Kennedy and Rostow also wanted Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale as part of the review team, despite Taylor's disagreement with his inclusion. President Ngo Dinh Diem sent a car to meet Lansdale at Tan Son Nhut airport, and he conferred with Diem before the other Americans did. Lansdale encouraged the South Vietnamese leader not to ask for U.S. troops, but Taylor came away from the trip convinced that they were necessary, sparking extensive debate in Washington later in the fall.

During this period, testing also began in Vietnam on methods for defoliation and NLF crop destruction. These efforts were the origins of a program that evolved into Operation Ranch Hand by the end of the year.



An early strategic hamlet, shown in 1962, with bamboo spikes on the perimeter. The South Vietnamese government built the strategic hamlets near existing villages, with CIA and eventually U.S. Special Forces involvement. Colby, *Lost Victory*.

1961

**Mid-1961**: Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu initiated the first phase of what became the strategic hamlet program. The operation, which involved moving peasants into fortified settlements, was based on a plan the British had used with some success in Malaya. The primary difference between strategic hamlets and the earlier agrovilles (*see Jan. 4, 1960; Aug. 1960*) was that the South Vietnamese government had relocated people from their villages into the agrovilles, while the government built the hamlet fortifications in or near existing villages. The program included British advisors along with CIA and eventually U.S. Special Forces personnel and

fully rolled out in 1962. The South Vietnamese—Nhu in particular—had different ideas about the program than the advisors and tried to expand the effort too rapidly in scope and location, to a projected 16,000 hamlets, often into areas where no security existed. Nevertheless, in the latter half of 1961 and early 1962, the initial implementation of the program made NLF efforts in parts of the countryside more difficult and forced the North Vietnamese to push more resources into the south.<sup>1</sup>

State Department official Roger Hilsman, who visited some of the hamlets, believed the effort could have worked if it had more closely followed the Malayan model and kept the compounds in more securable areas. He stated that Nhu "so corrupted it . . . that it was useless, worse than useless."<sup>2</sup>

**July 1**: The Department of the Air Force concluded a sole-source contract with Air America for piloting and maintaining H–34 helicopters to support the anticommunist government in Laos. Brig. Gen. Andrew Boyle, commander of the newly established MAAG in Laos, had initiated the procurement process in May with a request for aircraft to fly "where I want them, when I want them, with no interference." The operation was known as Project Mad Men, with the USAF paying Air America just over \$2.5 million during the first year of the contract and also providing "sheep-dipped" USAF pilots and mechanics who served out of uniform and with no papers linking them to the U.S. military.<sup>3</sup>

On the same date, President John Kennedy formally added Maxwell Taylor to the White House staff as military representative of the president. Taylor, who had retired in 1959 after serving as Army chief of staff, had advised the Kennedy campaign and consulted on various issues in the early days of the administration (*see Jan. 28, May 1*). Taylor was president of the under-construction Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York, but Kennedy prevailed on him to conduct an outside review of the Bay of Pigs debacle and ultimately to join his staff, in large part because of Kennedy's increasing skepticism of the advice he was receiving from the Joint Chiefs (*see Apr. 17–19*). Vietnam became a significant part of Taylor's portfolio, and he led a mission in October to review the situation

<sup>1.</sup> Philip E. Catton, "Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building: The Strategic Hamlet Programme in South Vietnam, 1961–1963," *International History Review* 21 (December 1999): 922–40; Nolting interview (1970), 56–57; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 109–10; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam*, 1941–1975 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 105–6; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 103, 106–7; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 61; Miller, *Misalliance*, 231–39; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 501; Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 119–20.

<sup>2.</sup> National Security Archive, "Episode 11—Vietnam: Interview with Roger Hilsman," December 6, 1998, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//coldwar/interviews/episode-11/hilsman1.html.

<sup>3.</sup> Castle, At War in the Shadows of Vietnam, 43-44 (quote); Castle, "Operation Millpond," 5, 14 n. 38.



President Kennedy convinced Maxwell D. Taylor, a former Army chief of staff, to join his administration as military representative of the president in July 1961. Kennedy thought the existing national security advisory structure had failed him in the Bay of Pigs and with confused suggestions for Laos. Taylor immediately began analyzing options for Vietnam but was diverted by the growing crisis in West Berlin. He led a review mission to Vietnam in October 1961. *Kennedy Library*.

there (*see Oct. 18–24*). After Taylor spent just over a year in the advisory role, Kennedy recalled him to active duty and appointed him as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a position Taylor assumed on October 1, 1962.<sup>4</sup>

State department official William Sullivan called Taylor's advisory position in 1961–62 an "ad hoc creation," something that "constitutionally or legally never existed." After Taylor arrived, the access Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer and the Joint Chiefs had to the president diminished significantly. USAF leaders were skeptical of Taylor, who had championed replacing the bomber fleet with missiles. As Gen. Curtis LeMay put it, Taylor "thought ground defense would make the airplane obsolete." LeMay clashed often with Taylor over subsequent months, and even more so after Taylor became chairman of the Joint Chiefs.<sup>5</sup>

**July 5**: The Policy Planning Council at the State Department asked the Defense Department to study the potential impact of a naval blockade of North Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4.</sup> McMaster, Dereliction of Duty, 10–17; Maxwell D. Taylor, Swords and Plowshares: A Distinguished Soldier, Statesman, and Presidential Adviser tells his Story (New York: Norton, 1972), 196–97; Williams, LeMay on Vietnam, 4–6.

<sup>5.</sup> Strober and Strober, "Let Us Begin Anew," 410 (1st-2d quotes); Williams, LeMay on Vietnam, 5 (3d quote).

<sup>6.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:425 n. 7.

July 14: Maxwell Taylor submitted his initial assessment of the situation in Vietnam to the president. The overriding question he asked was whether the solution sought would be a static defense along the South Vietnamese border to stop communist infiltration, or if the United States and its allies should consider "a movement of Vietnamese forces into Laos against the avenues of infiltration coupled perhaps with offensive air and guerrilla action against enemy forces." Taylor favored some method of securing the Laotian panhandle and the Mekong valley so they could not be used as routes for communist troops into South Vietnam and potentially into Thailand. "In so doing," he wrote, "it may become necessary or desirable to mount air attacks against targets in North Laos and North Vietnam, and to launch and support offensive guerrilla operations in these areas." Taylor believed the focus should be on indigenous forces, with U.S. troops limited to pilots and ground crews, men needed to secure the air bases, and additional Special Forces trainers for the ARVN. On July 16, Taylor asked the Joint Chiefs to formulate military plans to support three different contingencies he sketched in the July 14 memorandum.<sup>7</sup>

Taylor's arrival on the staff and his July 14 memorandum prompted discussions with Walt Rostow, the president's deputy national security advisor, and others, and the formation of a Southeast Asia task force. As the advisors moved forward with their planning, however, the communist threat to West Berlin rose to crisis status and consumed much of the focus of the administration (*see Aug. 13*). President Kennedy made a televised address on the subject on July 25.<sup>8</sup>

Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric recalled that Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale's "influence really went down after Taylor got in," although Kennedy still valued Lansdale's opinion on Vietnam and appointed him to the Taylor-Rostow mission in the fall, to Taylor's consternation (*see Oct. 18–24*).<sup>9</sup>

**July 17**: PACAF transferred Operation Field Goal (*see Apr. 17*) from Udorn, Thailand, to Don Muang airfield outside of Bangkok. The small USAF contingent, three officers and five enlisted operating a single RT–33 borrowed from the Philippine air force, flew twenty-four photo reconnaissance missions over Thailand in August and September. The unit resumed flights over Laos in October (*see Oct. 4*).<sup>10</sup>

July 20: President Kennedy brought Douglas MacArthur to Washington for consultations. At a lunch with the president and a few members of

<sup>7.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:223-24 (quotes); Kaiser, American Tragedy, 81.

<sup>8.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:102; Kaiser, American Tragedy, 80-82.

<sup>9.</sup> Gilpatric interview, 99.

<sup>10.</sup> PACAF History, July-December 1961, v. 1, 2:17, 19.



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A July 1961 map created by U.S. Army, Pacific, in conjunction with MAAG-Vietnam showed suspected infiltration routes through southern Laos into South Vietnam. Diem encouraged the thinking that troops from North Vietnam were playing significant roles in the insurrection rather than acknowledging the growing southern discontent. What became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail was still rudimentary at best at this time. U.S. leaders continued to consider options for sending U.S. forces into Laos to help secure this area.

Congress and the administration, the retired general "spoke at length and with his usual eloquence against ever introducing any American troops into Southeast Asia under any circumstances," according to Deputy Undersecretary of State Alexis Johnson. MacArthur's belief was that U.S. forces "would be overwhelmed by the massed manpower of communist China. He felt we should draw our line elsewhere." Johnson thought MacArthur's argument was "not entirely rational," particularly because of the logistical difficulties the Chinese would have faced in intervening in Vietnam, but it made a "deep impression" on Kennedy, who often referenced MacArthur's skepticism during subsequent discussions of Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

Ambassador Frederick Nolting later stated that "the Chinese threat to Southeast Asia, in my opinion, was overplayed." He observed that China assumed "a big brother's role" in the region as a "protector of those areas near its borders, and in that sense was a strong backer of North Vietnam and the communists in Laos." But Nolting did not believe military planners, many of whom shared MacArthur's concern with massive Chinese intervention, had taken into account Vietnam's centuries-long struggle to get out from under Chinese rule, with no desire to see it resume.<sup>12</sup>

**July 24**: With the situation in Laos less volatile after the cease-fire (*see May 3*) and deployment of the SEATO Field Force (Task Force 116) much less likely, Pacific Command withdrew Col. Harry Coleman from his role as coordinator of air operations there (*see Jan. 30*). Lt. Col. Asa A. Adair, USAF, became head of the Air Section of MAAG-Laos, a billet Coleman concurrently had been filling.<sup>13</sup>

**July 28**: President Kennedy met with Taylor, White House national security principals, and representatives from the State Department to consider various proposals for Southeast Asia. No civilian or military representatives from the Pentagon were invited, despite discussion of planning that Taylor had requested from the Joint Chiefs (*see July 14*). The concept that received the most attention was that the United States, in conjunction with Gen. Phoumi Nosavan's Royal Lao forces, Thailand, and South Vietnam, launch an offensive to secure the southern part of Laos. Some at the table thought that such an advance was possibly the only way to assure a noncommunist Laos, or at least a sector of it, with or without an agreement at Geneva.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11.</sup> Johnson, *Right Hand of Power*, 324–25. MacArthur had told French Gen. Jacques-Philippe Leclerc in 1945 that if he expected to reestablish French hegemony in Indochina, he had better "bring soldiers, and then more soldiers, and after that still more soldiers. But, even after all the soldiers you can spare are there, you probably still will not succeed." Don, *Our Endless War*, 143.

<sup>12.</sup> Nolting interview (1971), 10-11.

<sup>13.</sup> Coleman interview, 42, 67.

<sup>14.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:102–4; Kaiser, American Tragedy, 82–84; FRUS 1961–63, 24:322–26; Rust, So Much to Lose, 34–36.

The president was skeptical of the plan, and even more so that the American public would support it. He also wondered aloud whether Phoumi's real intent was to have the conference at Geneva break up and the United States send in troops to bolster his position. A memorandum of conversation noted that Kennedy made "no decision" but "made it very plain that he himself is at present very reluctant to make a decision to go into Laos." Nevertheless, the concept, which became known as SEATO Plan 5, remained an option in the eyes of several in the administration (*see Aug. 29*).<sup>15</sup>

**August**: Journalist Theodore H. White wrote to friends in the White House from South Vietnam that "the situation gets worse week by week." He reported that "guerrillas now control almost all the southern delta—so much so that I could find no American who would drive me outside Saigon in his car even by day without military convoy." White also was concerned about Diem's government, describing a "political breakdown of formidable proportions" and comparing Saigon to Chungking (now Chongqing) before China fell to the communists. He concluded that "if a defeat in South Vietnam is to be considered our defeat, if we *are* responsible for holding that area, then we must have authority to act. And that means intervention in Vietnam politics." White added, however, that "if we do decide so to intervene, have we the proper personnel, the proper instruments, the proper clarity of objectives to intervene successfully?" In his book *A Thousand Days*, Arthur Schlesinger quoted liberally from the letter, which had an impact on the administration's thinking about Vietnam.<sup>16</sup>

**August 3**: After consulting with Adm. Harry Felt, the CINCPAC, who believed that most of the additional troops Diem had requested were unnecessary (*see June 9*), the Joint Chiefs reiterated their June 21 advice that a total force of 200,000 (nine divisions) should be sufficient for the ARVN.<sup>17</sup>

**August 4**: President Kennedy approved U.S. support for gradual expansion of the South Vietnamese military to 200,000 men (*see June 9, 21*) as well as the basic tenets of the Staley group report that outlined the financial implications (*see June 16*). Kennedy informed Diem of his decision in a letter dated August 5, and the administration spelled out the details on August 11 in NSAM 65, which was a supplement to NSAM 52 (*see May 11*).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:324-25.

<sup>16.</sup> Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 544 (italics in original).

<sup>17.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:258; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:104-5.

<sup>18.</sup> Shulimson, *JCS and Vietnam*, 1:105; *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:259–63; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 11:241–44. Kennedy told Diem that the force probably would not reach 200,000 until "late in 1962."

**August 7**: The French and British foreign ministers met with Secretary of State Dean Rusk in Paris, along with French, British, and American senior diplomats from the Geneva negotiations. The representatives of the three nations agreed that they could support Prince Souvanna Phouma as prime minister of a neutral Laos, provided the resulting government met a number of conditions. These included a French military presence and an agreement that both the Pathet Lao and Phoumi would disband their armies. Rusk stressed that the United States considered it "essential to have friendly forces in the south," along the border with South Vietnam.<sup>19</sup>

**August 10**: A VNAF H–34 flew the first defoliant test mission in South Vietnam, using a Helicopter Insecticide Dispersal Apparatus, Liquid (HIDAL) system to spray the herbicide Dinoxol along a road north of Kontum. This trial was the first step toward what became Operation Ranch Hand (*see Aug. 24, Sept. 29, Oct. 22, Nov. 3, 7*). The United States had provided the equipment and chemicals through the newly established Combat Development and Test Center in Saigon, which was organized in conjunction with the Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency in response to one of the points in the Vietnam Task Force's Presidential Plan for Vietnam (*see May 20*).<sup>20</sup>

**August 13**: With Soviet backing, the East German government had its army block access to West Berlin and begin excavation for construction of the Berlin Wall, "confronting an already beleaguered Kennedy administration with yet another crisis," according to historian George Herring.<sup>21</sup>

**August 15**: A top-secret National Intelligence Estimate titled "Prospects for North and South Vietnam" concluded that the "outlook in South Vietnam is for a prolonged and difficult struggle with the Viet Cong insurgents." It indicated that communist forces controlled more than half

<sup>19.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:345-53 (quote, 349); Rust, So Much to Lose, 38-39.

<sup>20.</sup> William A. Buckingham Jr., *Operation Ranch Hand: The Air Force and Herbicides in Southeast Asia, 1961–1971* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1982), 11, https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/28/2001329797/-1/-1/0/AFD-100928-054.pdf; *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:228; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:183.

<sup>21.</sup> Herring, America's Longest War, 96 (quote); Kaiser, American Tragedy, 77–78, 85. The Kennedy administration, believing there was an eminent threat to the noncommunist sector of Berlin, sent more U.S. troops to Europe as part of a NATO show of force and also mobilized reserve elements. "It was a very, very dangerous situation," recalled Secretary McNamara. "The Soviets clearly sought to take West Berlin. There was no question as to what their objective was." National Security Archive, "Episode 11—Vietnam: Interview with Robert McNamara," December 6, 1998, https://nsarchive2. gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-11/mcnamara1.html. Kennedy had told Walt Rostow in early August that he believed the Western allies would be able to hold West Berlin, but he thought Khrushchev would have to do something because of all of the defections from East Germany. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 231.



A U.S. Army de Havilland Canada CV-2 Caribou in Laos. The Army sent one to Saigon in August 1961. Although the plane impressed in its trial, the Air Force successfully lobbied for its C-123s to be the primary bush supply aircraft for Vietnam during this period. Maj. Gen. Theodore R. Milton, USAF, commander of Thirteenth Air Force at the time, conceded that "we had nothing that could do what the Caribou could do." The Pentagon transferred the CV-2s to the Air Force in 1966–67, which redesignated them C-7s. Ahern, *Undercover Armies*.

of the Mekong delta in South Vietnam as well as most of southern Laos. The document estimated the "hard-core strength" of the PLAF in South Vietnam at 12,000, "augmented by several thousand supporters."<sup>22</sup>

The intelligence officials also noted that North Vietnam had built "a limited air capability with considerable military potential." The authors said that the North Vietnamese had renovated old French airfields and acquired some small transport aircraft (*see Oct. 1960*). Observers had spotted "a few" Soviet IL–10 propeller fighters that they thought may have been turned over to the North Vietnamese.<sup>23</sup>

Despite concerns at high levels in the U.S. government about supplies and personnel moving into South Vietnam by way of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the report made only a passing reference to "infiltration by land and sea from North Vietnam." There was no mention of the trail network or of North Vietnamese regulars possibly engaged in activities in the south.<sup>24</sup>

**August 23**: A single U.S. Army CV–2 Caribou—an experimental "Y" model of the aircraft—arrived in Saigon for testing by the Combat Development and Test Center. The plane impressed in trials, landing at isolated airstrips

<sup>22. &</sup>quot;Prospects for North and South Vietnam," NIE 14.3/53-61, August 15, 1961, Library of Congress, 2 (1st quote), 10 (2d–3d quotes), http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pow/pdf/Vietnam/NIE 14.3 53-61.pdf.

<sup>23.</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>24.</sup> Ibid., 10.

previously limited to much smaller aircraft, and the MAAG put it to work ferrying Special Forces and supplies to remote locations. In December, however, Admiral Felt turned down an Army request to send a full CV–2 company, as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs had already designated a USAF C–123 squadron for deployment for what became Project Mule Train (*see Dec. 4*). That same month, the sole CV–2 carried Diem on two trips deep into the countryside.<sup>25</sup>

Maj. Gen. Theodore Milton, commander of Thirteenth Air Force, recalled that "the Army had the Caribou and we didn't have anything in the Air Force that would go into remote fields that the Army was using, except the C–123, which could do it marginally." He conceded that "we had nothing that could do what the Caribou could do," but initially, the USAF fought its deployment because of the "interservice scrap." Milton noted that the C–123s "did do, in fact, quite a good job," adding that "the fellows who flew them deserve enormous credit," as "the C–123 was not the world's greatest flying machine, and they really took it into some tough places." The Pentagon transferred the CV–2s to the USAF in 1966–67, which redesignated them C–7s.<sup>26</sup>

**August 24**: The Joint Chiefs suggested to Secretary McNamara that the United States consider aerial interdiction of the inland trails by which they believed the NLF was receiving supplies.<sup>27</sup>

On the same date, a VNAF C–47 flew the first fixed-wing defoliant test mission in South Vietnam. The aircraft sprayed the herbicide Dinoxol along Route 13 about fifty miles north of Saigon. The USAF's Special Aerial Spray Flight provided the equipment for this and other test missions and deployed TSgt. Leon O. Roe to assemble and install the sprayers. The USAF also sent Capt. Mario D. Cadori to train VNAF pilots in low-altitude spray techniques. U.S. evaluators were disappointed with early testing results, but Diem wanted the defoliant capability, giving impetus to a program that would evolve into Operation Ranch Hand (*see Aug. 10, Sept. 29, Oct. 22, Nov. 3, 7*).<sup>28</sup>

25. John J. Tolson, *Airmobility*, *1961–1971* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1973), 13, 44–47, https://history.army.mil/html/books/090/90-4/CMH\_Pub\_90-4-B.pdf. According to General Tolson (p. 13 n. 1), the USAF had their C–123s scheduled to be phased out of the active inventory in 1961, but when Secretary McNamara suggested that the aircraft be turned over to the Army as trainers while the CV–7 was developed, "the Air Force suddenly discovered new and pressing Air Force requirements for the C–123. Thus the Army Caribou protagonists not only pushed the Caribou into being, but—incidentally—saved the C–123 for much-needed duty in Vietnam." General Milton of the USAF confirmed that "we either pulled them [C–123s] out of storage or took them away from the Reserves. They were not in normal active inventory at the time we began to use them." Milton interview, 90.

<sup>26.</sup> Milton interview, 88-89.

<sup>27.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 80.

<sup>28.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 11, 13.



Irregulars of the Hmong ethnic group training to fight the Pathet Lao. The United States had been aiding these troops since February, with expanded commitment to a force of up to 11,000 in August. Lt. Col. Heinie Aderholt oversaw Air America arms and aid deliveries to these troops. *USAF*.

**August 27**: A detachment of the 405th Fighter Wing deployed to Don Muang for Bell Tone III, a further augmentation of the defense capabilities of the Royal Thai Air Force (*see Apr.*). Elements of the 6009th Tactical Support Group and 6010th Tactical Group supported the various USAF activities during this period.<sup>29</sup>

**August 29**: Although President Kennedy had expressed significant skepticism of a plan presented in late July for multilateral intervention in Southeast Asia (*see July 28*), some in the administration and at the Pentagon continued to fear a breakdown of the Geneva talks on Laos (*see May 16*), particularly in light of the Berlin crisis (*see Aug. 13*). Planning continued, and on this date, the president met with senior national security principals and Ambassador Averell Harriman to examine a number of options. The meeting began with consideration of the U.S. position regarding Souvanna (*see Aug. 7*). Harriman said that there was not much chance of getting Souvanna "to accept our views unless he had some direct indication of U.S. backing and support." Discussion continued of how and where Souvanna should be approached, what concessions the United States was willing to make in an effort to sway him away the Soviets, and also of whether Souvanna could be induced to remove himself from consideration to be prime minister (*see Sept. 15–17*).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29. 2</sup>d ADVON History, November 1961-October 1962, 1:4.

<sup>30.</sup> Kaiser, American Tragedy, 85-88; FRUS 1961-63, 24:390-93 (quote, 391).

Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then presented a revision of the military plan, SEATO Plan 5, which had been discussed on July 28. In the event of renewed communist aggression, the service chiefs envisioned putting 4,000 U.S. troops into the Mekong River region in southern Laos, with 9,000 U.S. troops across the border in Thailand. The total SEATO multinational force might be as large as 40,000 men, all of whom Secretary Rusk expected would have to be supplied by the United States. Secretary McNamara thought any commitment in Laos had to be weighed against what he saw as the much more significant and dangerous situation in Berlin (*see Aug. 13*). Kennedy authorized continued military planning with SEATO nations, with U.S. representatives making it clear that they were "developing a plan, but were not agreeing now to implement it." The president also signed off on the deployment of 500 more U.S. advisors for Phoumi's noncommunist forces in Laos.<sup>31</sup>

At the end of the meeting, Kennedy approved twice-a-week reconnaissance flights over Laos at an altitude of 5,000 feet (*see Nov. 2*), as well as support for 2,000 additional Hmong troops (*see Feb. 8*), bringing their force level to 11,000.<sup>32</sup>

**August 31**: The Soviet Union surprised the international community by resuming atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons.<sup>33</sup>

**September**: The number of engagements between ARVN troops and PLAF insurgents rose dramatically, from 41 in August to 450 in September. Five or six of the attacks were of larger scale than typical insurgent assaults. Lt. Gen. Lionel McGarr, the MAAG-Vietnam commander, reported the apparent increase in NLF/PLAF activities and capabilities to Admiral Felt on September 10. McGarr primarily blamed infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos into the central highlands of Vietnam, where the South Vietnamese military was not equipped to surveil or counter communist movements. Southern-based communists were driving the escalation, however, not infiltrators from North Vietnam, as a visiting State Department official correctly surmised (*see Sept. 27*).<sup>34</sup>

The Chinese expressed concern about the NLF's seemingly new commitment to larger-unit PLAF operations, with one senior official stating

<sup>31.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 24:393–99 (quote, 394); Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:106–7; Kaiser, American Tragedy, 88–89; McNamara, In Retrospect, 37–38.

<sup>32.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:398-99; Ahern, Undercover Armies, 103.

<sup>33.</sup> Kaiser, American Tragedy, 91.

<sup>34.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 72; FRUS 1961–63, 1:296–98; Kaiser, American Tragedy, 94; Moyar, Triumph Forsaken, 134–35; Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 112–13. Ambassador Nolting later observed that "in those days, the principal arms of the Viet Cong were a hodgepodge of rather crude weapons," which had been manufactured by the NLF in South Vietnam, not imported along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Nolting interview (1971), 9–10.



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A December 1961 map created by U.S. Army, Pacific, in conjunction with MAAG-Vietnam, shows the areas of intensified PLAF (Viet Cong) activity in the fall of that year. Much of it was in pockets within fifty to seventy-five miles of Saigon, magnifying the immediacy of the conflict in the capital.

that the Vietnamese communists "have exposed themselves too much." In meetings in Hanoi in December (*see Dec. 15–31*), the Chinese more explicitly advised caution, particularly in light of increasing U.S. response.<sup>35</sup>

**September 5**: Secretary McNamara told the three military service secretaries that he wanted to establish an experimental command under the MAAG in Saigon as a laboratory for new operational and organizational approaches to the challenges in Vietnam. Gen. Curtis LeMay, the USAF chief of staff, briefed Eugene Zuckert, the secretary of the Air Force, on the capabilities of the 4400th CCTS (*see Apr. 14*) and suggested that deployment of an element of that unit would fit with McNamara's plans. Zuckert recommended the 4400th to McNamara on September 19, and McNamara took the concept to the Joint Chiefs (*see Oct. 5, 11*).<sup>36</sup>

**September 12**: Even though the Geneva accords prohibited jet aircraft in Vietnam, on this date and again on the 19th, Admiral Felt asked the Pentagon to seek State Department approval for the United States to introduce jets. He argued that they were needed to help modernize the VNAF. Ambassador Nolting disagreed with Felt's recommendation and said the United States should continue to abide by the Geneva restriction. The U.S. position on this issue did not change until 1962.<sup>37</sup>

**September 15**: Brig. Gen. William H. Craig, USA, of the Joint Staff presented a report from a tour he and four other officers had conducted in Southeast Asia at the request of the Joint Chiefs. They were there during the time fighting in South Vietnam began escalating (*see Sept.*). The team noted what intelligence believed was a buildup of Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops in southern Laos. Craig and his colleagues also wrote that Diem thought that Hanoi was transitioning from guerrilla operations to open warfare (*see Oct. 2*). They found the political and military situations in Laos chaotic and morale low. The U.S. officers recommended immediate implementation of SEATO Plan 5 for multilateral intervention in Laos (*see Aug. 29*).<sup>38</sup>

From conversations with Diem, Craig reported that the South Vietnamese president was willing to accept a U.S. brigade or even a division as "school troops," presumably a training mission. Craig said that Diem definitely wanted U.S. forces on the ground "when the balloon goes up."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35.</sup> Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 112-13.

<sup>36.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 80.

<sup>37.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:186.

<sup>38.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:298-300; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:105, 110-11.

<sup>39.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:111.

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**September 15–17**: At President Kennedy's urging, Ambassador Harriman held a series of meetings with Souvanna in Rangoon (now Yangon), Burma. Among many points discussed, Harriman told the Laotian prince that "a major U.S. interest was to get [the] Lao government's cooperation in closing [the] Ho Chi Minh Trail and [the] border with South Vietnam." According to Harriman, Souvanna replied that "no one will cross Laos from north to south. We will not allow any country to violate our territories." Souvanna did not offer any thoughts on how he would stop the movement, however, and he conceded that the Pathet Lao showed "a certain good will toward Viet Cong passage through Laos." Ambassador Nolting, who increasing became a critic of the neutralization plan, cabled the State Department that he and the other ambassadors in the region did not believe that a neutral government or an international commission would be able to stop the flow from North Vietnam.<sup>40</sup>

In discussions with Soviet representatives in October, Harriman tried to get the Russians to guarantee in writing, as part of a prospective final settlement on Laos, that they would be responsible for ensuring North Vietnamese compliance with Laotian neutrality, specifically with stopping the movement of men and supplies through Laos into South Vietnam. The lead Soviet negotiator had stated in September that the Russians "would and could control North Vietnam." The Soviets balked at the inclusion of such a provision in the accords, however, arguing, as writer William J. Rust put it, that "the United States could not expect the North Vietnamese to sign an agreement that anticipated their violation of it."<sup>41</sup>

**September 18**: Soon after midnight, a PLAF force overran and briefly occupied Phouc Vinh, a provincial capital just fifty-five miles north of Saigon. Insurgents burned public buildings and beheaded the province chief. Ambassador Nolting's opinion was that the attack "should be balanced against recent ARVN victories" and "demonstrates that the tide has not yet turned." Nevertheless, he cautioned that other high-profile assaults might occur, "perhaps even closer to Saigon." The Phouc Vinh incident received particular attention in Washington and prompted renewed discussion of deployment of more U.S. troops (*see Oct. 5*).<sup>42</sup>

40. Rust, *So Much to Lose*, 42–45 (quotes, 43); *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:301–4, 24:422. Nolting said in 1970 that "more and more it became apparent that the safeguards with which we had started negotiating that treaty, safeguards assuring the territorial integrity, neutrality of Laos against possible violations by the communist signatories, . . . were being whittled away one by one. I became somewhat concerned by this because if the treaty as originally envisaged, making a real neutral out of Laos, didn't come off that way, then it exposed the flank of South Vietnam and made our job that much more difficult." As Nolting's frustration increased, he remembered "having it out rather hot and heavy with Mr. Harriman on this score on several occasions." Nolting interview (1970), 84–92 (1st quote, 84–85; 2d quote, 87).

41. Rust, So Much to Lose, 46-49 (1st quote, 47; 2d quote, 49); Kaiser, American Tragedy, 91-92.

42. Miller, *Misalliance*, 227; John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times: Memoirs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 469; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 134; *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:305–6 (quotes); Rostow interview (1964), 84; Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 269.



In his first address to the UN General Assembly on September 25, President Kennedy spoke of the "smoldering coals of war in Southeast Asia." He said that "South Vietnam is already under attack—sometimes by a single assassin, sometimes by a band of guerrillas, recently by full battalions." *Kennedy Library.* 

**September 22**: A joint State Department-Defense Department message to the U.S. embassy in Vietnam said that the scale of PLAF attacks (*see Sept.*) and concerns about the "probable effect" they were having on South Vietnamese morale might "require" the United States to "take certain emergency actions within 30 days." The communiqué requested comments from the embassy, the MAAG, and Pacific Command on a list of items that the ARVN, Civil Guard, and VNAF might want to request and that the authors thought the United States might be able to supply. These included large transport aircraft for supply and defoliation. The document also said that U.S. officials should encourage "better use of existing resources," such as the AD–6 aircraft the United States had provided to the VNAF (*see May*), and suggested that the ARVN might want to consider "probes into Laos."<sup>43</sup>

**September 23**: John Kenneth Galbraith, the U.S. ambassador to India, recorded in his journal that "Harriman is reasonably optimistic about a settlement in Laos, his optimism being based on the feeling that the Russians want to forget about the place. Souvanna Phouma seems to him satisfactory. He is a patriot, Harriman believes, and the strongest of the three princes, and anti-Communist."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:307-6.

<sup>44.</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal: A Personal Account of the Kennedy Years (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 187.

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**September 25**: In his address to the UN General Assembly in New York, President Kennedy highlighted the "smoldering coals of war in Southeast Asia." He declared that "South Vietnam is already under attack sometimes by a single assassin, sometimes by a band of guerrillas, recently by full battalions." Kennedy said that "the very simple question confronting the world community is whether measures can be devised to protect the small and the weak from such tactics. For if they are successful in Laos and South Vietnam, the gates will be opened wide." These were not "wars of liberation," the president asserted, quoting Nikita Khrushchev's rhetoric (*see Jan. 6*), because "these are free countries living under their own governments." He also stated that "Laotian territory is being used to infiltrate South Vietnam."<sup>45</sup>

On the same date, Kennedy met with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, head of state of Cambodia, who was in New York to attend the UN General Assembly.<sup>46</sup>

**September 27**: William J. Jorden, a former *New York Times* reporter who had joined the State Department's Policy Planning Board, filed a report with Taylor about a fact-finding trip he had just completed in South Vietnam and Laos. While he detailed the trails through Laos and Cambodia that the communists used to supply insurgents in South Vietnam, he added that "we delude ourselves if we visualize the Viet Cong effort in the South as primarily a movement of large, organized units across the GVN borders." Jorden noted, correctly, that while there had been some North Vietnamese augmentation in the PLAF ranks, the communists had recruited most of their manpower in the south. Rostow thought Jorden should prepare a white paper that made the case to the public of communist activity in South Vietnam (*see Dec. 8*). Just weeks later, Jorden returned to Vietnam as part of the Taylor-Rostow mission (*see Oct. 18–24*).<sup>47</sup>

**September 29**: While Admiral Felt was in Saigon to survey the situation in Vietnam in the wake of increased NLF/PLAF activity (*see Sept.*), he joined Ambassador Nolting and General McGarr for a meeting with Diem at the presidential palace. Diem surprised the Americans with what Nolting described as a "rather large and unexpected request" for a bilateral defense treaty. Although the State Department told Nolting to tell Diem that the proposal would be considered "promptly and sympathetically," such a treaty would have abrogated a key article of the Geneva accords

<sup>45.</sup> Public Papers, 1961, 624.

<sup>46.</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "Visits by Foreign Leaders: Cambodia," http://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/visits/cambodia.

<sup>47.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:112.

and also would have needed U.S. Senate ratification. The treaty idea never progressed, but Diem's proposal was part of the backdrop of the Taylor-Rostow mission just weeks later (*see Oct. 18–24*).<sup>48</sup>

At the same September 29 meeting, Diem asked the U.S. representatives about a defoliant that might be used to destroy NLF rice crops. The South Vietnamese had tried attacking rice fields with napalm and rockets, with little success. Felt and McGarr surmised from the discussion that Diem was seeking something that was closer to chemical weapons than the aerially delivered herbicides on trial at the time (*see Aug. 10, 24*) and made no commitments on the matter. McGarr did, however, contact the Pentagon four days later about potential use of defoliants in NLF areas.<sup>49</sup>

Also on the 29th, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department issued a classified paper, "South Vietnam: Crisis and Short-Term Prospects." The authors concluded that more than half the territory in the Mekong delta region and in several of the central provinces was "under varying degrees of Communist control." The document also pointed out that Diem's leadership and the stability of his government were "more seriously questioned" than at any time since he consolidated power in 1955.<sup>50</sup>

**October**: In response to the early success of the South Vietnamese government's strategic hamlet program (*see mid-1961*), the communist leadership in South Vietnam decided that it had to intensify armed engagement, calling for a "continuous offensive" in an effort to create a "general uprising." The offensive would be centrally planned and coordinated and would focus initially on rural areas. Moderates in the Hanoi government rejected the southern directive, however, urging caution for fear of greater U.S. involvement. North Vietnam ruled against a coordinated effort at the exact time that U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders became convinced that one was underway, and that it must be met with increasing force (*see Oct. 2, 5*).<sup>51</sup>

**October 1**: USAF personnel to staff a mobile control and reporting post arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport on the outskirts of Saigon. Diem had requested U.S. support for improved radar coverage in Vietnam when

<sup>48.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:316–17 (quotes); Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 94; Shulimson, *JCS and Vietnam*, 1:112–13. Some books have dated this meeting as having taken place on the 30th due to a vague description in the cable from Nolting cited, but a MAAG memorandum of the meeting clearly dates it on the 29th. See Buckingham, *Operation Ranch Hand*, 208 n. 13.

<sup>49.</sup> Buckingham, *Operation Ranch Hand*, 13, 208 n. 12; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:190. Even after the launch of Ranch Hand, Diem continued to press for chemicals to use against the NLF, with President Kennedy finally approving limited testing a year after this initial discussion. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 117.

<sup>50.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:258-90 (1st quote, 258; 2d quote, 271).

<sup>51.</sup> Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 110-14 (quotes, 111); Nguyen, Hanoi's War, 60.

Secretary of State D. Dean Rusk speaking to the press outside the West Wing of the White House in August 1961. On October 6, he cabled Ambassador Frederick Nolting in Saigon to request Nolting's "most urgent estimate" of the prospects in Vietnam. Nolting in later years was critical of what he saw as Rusk's lack of full engagement on Vietnam. *Kennedy Library*.

Vice President Lyndon Johnson had visited (*see May 11–13*), and radar had been a part of the Vietnam Task Force's plan sent to Saigon the same month (*see May 20*). Pacific Command did not act on the issue, however, until the situation in South Vietnam worsened. On Admiral Felt's order, the USAF on September 11 had directed the deployment, drawing the force from 507th Tactical Control Group, Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina. The airmen left Shaw on September 26. They reached Saigon on October 1, with their equipment arriving on the 3d. The unit became operational at Tan Son Nhut on October 5 as Det 2, 5th Tactical Control Group.<sup>52</sup>

Det 2 brought with it MPS-11 search and MPS-16 height-finder radars, which were fully operational on a twenty-four-hour basis by the end of October. The unit came online with 67 men, supplemented by 314 additional personnel later in the fall. These airmen controlled and reported flights at Tan Son Nhut and also began training Vietnamese



<sup>52. 2</sup>d ADVON History, November 1961–October 1962, 9–14; Futrell, Advisory Years, 74. Futrell wrote that the detachment from the 507th TCG was "the first USAF unit to arrive in Vietnam on a permanent duty status." The 2d ADVON history (p. 13), however, seems to muddle, if not contradict, Futrell's assertion with the statement that the "detachment was manned to operate as a CRC for a 30-day period and then have its support functions provided by a base."

personnel as of October 16, with the first VNAF tactical air control class graduating on November 17.<sup>53</sup>

**October 2**: Diem stated during an address to the South Vietnamese national assembly that the conflict "is no longer a guerrilla war. It is a war waged by an enemy who attacks us with regular units fully and heavily equipped and who seeks a strategic decision in Southeast Asia in conformity with the order of the Communist International."<sup>54</sup>

**October 4**: The Operation Field Goal detachment at Don Muang airport in Bangkok (*see Apr. 17, July 17*) resumed reconnaissance flights over Laos, which PACAF had suspended on May 10 after the cease-fire. The small unit flew thirty-two missions in its single RT–33A before Able Mable superseded the program in November (*see Nov. 10*).<sup>55</sup>

October 5: As news from Vietnam worsened, several plans for limited U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia circulated among the Pentagon, the White House national security staff, and the State Department. On this date, Walt Rostow proposed sending SEATO troops, including U.S. forces, to South Vietnam for deployment along the Laotian border in an effort to interdict communist infiltration. The Joint Chiefs recommended against the plan on October 9, stating that with hundreds of miles of border to secure, it would be nearly impossible to keep the communists from evading SEATO defenses. The Joint Chiefs also thought that such a deployment would not strengthen the border they saw as more important, the one with North Vietnam. Their preference was for a SEATO military effort to secure all or most of Laos, some variation of SEATO Plan 5 (see July 28, Aug. 29). If such a move was off the table, they offered a plan for the deployment of 22,800 SEATO troops in the central highlands of South Vietnam, where communist activity was flourishing. Another October proposal from the Pentagon had U.S. aircraft dropping defoliants and mines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail (see Aug. 24).56

Rostow concluded his October 5 memorandum to the president by noting that "whatever you decide next week, I come back to my old pitch:

53. 2d ADVON History, November 1961–October 1962, 9–14; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:174; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 74. An internal USAF document from a year earlier had recorded that "reports on the utilization of on-hand equipments [by the South Vietnamese] create doubt that this country could effectively utilize equipment in more sophisticated forms without intensive technical assistance and training programs." History of Assistant for Mutual Security, 1 July 1960–31 December 1960, 65.

54. Futrell, Advisory Years, 73.

55. PACAF History, July–December 1961, v. 1, 2:19.

56. Rust, So Much to Lose, 45–47; FRUS 1961–63, 24:443–49; Kaiser, American Tragedy, 96–98; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:113–16.
it is essential that Generals Taylor and Lansdale take a good, hard look at Vietnam on the ground, and soon" (*see Oct. 11*).<sup>57</sup>

Also on the 5th, the Joint Chiefs approved Secretary McNamara's recommendation of the deployment of a detachment of the USAF 4400th CCTS to Vietnam for what became the Farm Gate operations (*see Sept. 5, Oct. 11*).<sup>58</sup>

**October 6**: In response to an October 5 eyes-only request from Secretary Rusk for Ambassador Nolting's "most urgent estimate" of the prospects in Vietnam, as well as suggestions of "action you consider essential in Vietnam not to succumb to [the] Viet Cong," Nolting replied with a tepid endorsement of Diem as "our only feasible alternative." He conceded, however, that "two of my closest colleagues believe that this country cannot attain the required unity, total national dedication, and organizational efficiency necessary to win with Diem at [the] helm." The ambassador blamed the worsening situation on North Vietnamese insertion through Laos and feared that Diem's government might be at risk for overthrow "if infiltrations continue unchecked." He described the South Vietnamese security forces as "greatly overextended" because of increased PLAF activity (see Sept.). Nolting stated that the "only way" he could see mitigation of the developing crisis was by a partition of Laos. He had never favored neutralization as a solution, in large part because he did not think it would stop infiltration into South Vietnam (see Sept. 15-17).59

On the same date, in his column in the *Washington Post*, well-connected journalist Joseph Alsop wrote that "quiet but serious consideration is now being given to sending American troops to South Vietnam." On October 7, the *New York Times* followed with a front-page story titled "US Considering Sending Troops to Help Vietnam."<sup>60</sup>

**October 11**: At a meeting of the national security principals about Southeast Asia that was characterized as off the record, President Kennedy made two significant decisions about Vietnam. One was to send a team to review the situation there and make recommendations. The group was to be headed by Taylor but also included Rostow and General Lansdale and came to include General Milton of Thirteenth Air Force as well (*see Oct. 18–24*). Kennedy announced what came to be called the Taylor-Rostow mission at his news conference that afternoon. When a reporter asked whether the high-profile review was in preparation to send troops, the president replied that "we're going to wait till General Taylor comes back

<sup>57.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:445.

<sup>58.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 80; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:187.

<sup>59.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:326-28.

<sup>60.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:119.

and brings an up-to-date description of the situation." He stated that "as you know, in the last two or three months there has been a large increase in the number of the forces that have been involved. There has been evidence that some of these forces have come from beyond the frontiers." After he received Taylor's "educated military guess as to what the situation that the government there faces," then the administration would "come to conclusions as what is best to do."<sup>61</sup>

Rostow had been advocating for weeks that Lansdale be a part of any Vietnam review (*see Oct. 5*), and Roswell Gilpatric recorded in his notes that Lansdale was specifically mentioned at this October 11 meeting. Soon thereafter, Kennedy told Lansdale that "I want you to go out to Vietnam." When Lansdale asked for what reason, the president replied, "Well, just to take a look for me." Lansdale was wary about how his inclusion on the team would be received, as he had been "warned off Vietnam largely by State, but also some with Defense. They told me some of the military didn't want me to go out there and get in their hair again." Taylor had been influenced by the negative views some in military leadership had of Lansdale and told him that he would not be able to meet with any senior officials. (Taylor much later even denied that Lansdale was officially a part of the mission.) While en route to Asia, Taylor informed Lansdale that he was going to send him to the 17th parallel to review border defenses. General LeMay had other plans for Lansdale, however, as did Diem (*see Oct. 18–24*).<sup>62</sup>

At the same October 11 national security meeting, Kennedy authorized the deployment of a detachment of the 4400th CCTS to Vietnam "to serve under the MAAG as a training mission and not for combat at the present time" (*see Sept. 5, Oct. 5, 13*). The USAF gave this operation the code name Farm Gate (*see Nov. 5, 14*).<sup>63</sup>

General LeMay had broader designs for the 4400th, which had already become known as "Jungle Jim," and had formed it with more offensive

61. *FRUS* 1961–63, 1:343–44, 24:465; *Public Papers,* 1961, 656, 660 (quotes). A memorandum from the morning meeting recorded that the president would announce at the news conference that Taylor and Rostow were going for the purpose of conducting an "economic survey," a hardly credible ruse that Kennedy chose not to try to sell. There was already speculation in the press that troops would deploy. *FRUS* 1961–63, 1:343 (quote); Shulimson, *JCS and Vietnam*, 1:119–20. Kennedy told the press of the Taylor-Rostow mission before either Ambassador Nolting or Diem had been notified, to the embarrassment of the U.S. embassy. *FRUS* 1961–63, 1:343 n. 3. Nolting found out about the mission from a Saigon radio broadcast. He later described the genesis of the review as "rather sudden." Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal*, 233; Nolting interview (1970), 57 (quote).

62. *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:343, 24:445; Edward G. Lansdale, interview with Ted Gittinger, September 15, 1981, transcript, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 40–41 (quotes), http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/lansdale\_edward\_1981\_0915.pdf (hereafter Lansdale interview [Sept. 1981]); Lansdale interview (1970), 115–16; Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 421–22; Taylor interview, 5–6. Taylor claimed in this interview that Lansdale "was just getting a ride on my plane." A document outlining responsibilities for various members of the mission did show Lansdale very vaguely in charge of reviewing "unconventional warfare." *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:389–90.

63. FRUS 1961-63, 1:343 (quote); Futrell, Advisory Years, 80.



Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, USAF chief of staff, had personally overseen the standing up of the 4400th CCTS in the spring while he was still vice chief. As the Kennedy administration sought more irregular warfare options in the fall, LeMay moved aggressively to promote deployment of a detachment of that unit. USAF.

counterinsurgency capabilities in mind as the USAF complement to the Special Forces (*see Apr. 14, Nov. 14*). He reinforced this irregular warfare concept in his October predeployment briefing with Col. Benjamin King, commander of the unit. When Lansdale traveled to Vietnam with the Taylor-Rostow mission, LeMay had Lansdale brief Diem about the 4400th and lobby the South Vietnamese president for an expanded role for the detachment (*see Nov. 14, Early Dec.*).<sup>64</sup>

Between the national security meeting and the press conference, Kennedy had lunch with *New York Times* columnist Arthur B. Krock. The president said that the Joint Chiefs had proposed sending 40,000 troops to Southeast Asia, but he "was not favorable to the suggestion at this time," according to Krock's notes. Kennedy said he still believed what he had said in the Senate seven years earlier, that U.S. forces "should not be involved on

64. King interview, 26–30, 37–38, 41; Lansdale interview (1971), 75; Futrell, Advisory Years, 80.

the Asian mainland, especially in a country with the difficult terrain of Laos and inhabited by people who don't care how the East-West dispute as to freedom and self-determination was resolved." The president also said that the United States "can't interfere in civil disturbances created by guerrillas, and it was hard to prove this wasn't largely the situation in Vietnam."<sup>65</sup>

In Krock's column for the next day's *Times*, however, his focus was on Kennedy's comments about the ongoing crisis in Berlin (*see Aug. 13*). He did not mention Vietnam at all. In his column on the 11th, Alsop had noted the "extraordinary puzzling and noteworthy fact that neither the country nor the Capital seems to be particularly excited" about the situation in Southeast Asia.<sup>66</sup>

**October 12**: Reacting to news of the high-profile Taylor-Rostow review of U.S. priorities in Vietnam (*see Oct. 11, 18–24*), Premier Zhou Enlai stated that China could not remain "indifferent to the increasingly grave situation caused by United States imperialism in South Vietnam."<sup>67</sup>

On the same date, General McGarr sent a lengthy letter to General Lemnitzer that contained McGarr's "frank appraisal of the developing situation" in Vietnam. He began by offering an extended defense for the lack of progress in the development of Vietnamese security forces during his thirteen-month tenure with the MAAG, for which he blamed U.S. State Department/U.S. embassy interference as much as Diem's delays. McGarr argued that the deteriorating situation was "basically political" and that no counterinsurgency effort would succeed without the "absolute requirement" of "gaining and maintaining trust and confidence in the established government, particularly at village and hamlet level." As things stood, he reported that best estimates were that 25 percent of the population was actively assisting the NLF, with another 25 percent "sitting on the fence," although he conceded that South Vietnamese intelligence gathering was "chaotic" and "uncoordinated." McGarr expressed frustration at Diem's unwillingness to acknowledge the negative impact of governmental instability. In fact, Diem and his associates "tended to blame their defeats and shortcomings on American non-support to an increasing degree."68

McGarr spent much of the rest of the letter explaining why the MAAG had not yet developed a "National Plan" for fighting the insurgency, a concept President Kennedy had approved in January (*see Jan. 28*). The general thought it "unrealistic" that Ambassador Nolting, the State

<sup>65.</sup> Quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 101. For then-Senator Kennedy's statements about Vietnam in 1954, see Williams, *USAF in Southeast Asia*, 1:133–34.

<sup>66.</sup> Quoted in Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:119–20.

<sup>67.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 85.

<sup>68.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:347-53, 356 (1st quote, 347; 2d-5th quotes, 351; 6th-7th quotes, 353; 8th quote, 356).

Department, and Walt Rostow were expecting a timetable for "clearing the entire country of the communist guerrilla." McGarr still stressed the need for strong conventional forces and noted his concern that Vietnamese commanders had "watered down the capability of the regular ARVN divisions beyond the danger point" by stripping them to form special forces units. He wanted nearly all of the 30,000 new ARVN troops the United States had authorized (*see Aug. 4*) to fill two conventional-force divisions, but he had heard that the State Department was pushing to have most of the men used as special forces.<sup>69</sup>

Also on the 12th, McGarr asked Secretary McNamara for six sprayequipped aircraft for defoliation operations (*see Nov. 9*).<sup>70</sup>

**October 13**: Ambassador Nolting cabled Washington that South Vietnamese administration officials were telling him that Diem's views on the introduction of U.S. forces "had changed in light of [the] worsening situation. Idea was to have 'symbolic' U.S. strength near 17th parallel."<sup>71</sup>

Also on the 13th, NSAM 104 codified the decisions from the October 11 meeting. Concerning the 4400th CCTS, the document stated that subject to South Vietnamese government approval, "which is now being sought, introduce the Air Force Jungle Jim Squadron into Viet Nam for the initial purpose of training Vietnamese forces." The memorandum described Taylor's mission as being sent "to explore ways in which assistance of all types might be more effective." The document also noted that the United States would "initiate guerrilla ground action, including use of U.S. advisers if necessary, against Communist aerial resupply missions in the Tchepone [Xépôn] area." Tchepone was in the southern Laos panhandle only about twenty-five miles from the South Vietnam border, in the area near Khe Sanh. Tchepone had a large dirt airstrip that the French had cleared. When the Royal Lao Army abandoned the airfield in 1961, the communists claimed it, and reports suggested that they had begun flying supplies to this advanced point on the Ho Chi Minh Trial. Noncommunist forces would make several thrusts against Tchepone over the subsequent decade with no success, including a U.S.-backed ARVN incursion in 1971.72

On the same date, Kennedy put his expectations for the review mission in a letter to Taylor. The general, Rostow, and their party were being sent "for the purpose of appraising the situation in South Vietnam, particularly

<sup>69.</sup> Ibid., 1:347-59 (1st-3d quotes, 353; 4th quote, 357).

<sup>70.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:190.

<sup>71.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:120.

<sup>72.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:328 (quotes); John M. Collins, *Military Geography for Professionals and the Public* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1998), 367, 370, 373, 384–85; Ahern, *Undercover Armies*, 103.

as it concerns the threat to the internal security and defense of that country and adjacent areas." Kennedy reminded Taylor that "in your assessment you should bear in mind that the initial responsibility for the effective maintenance of the independence of South Vietnam rests with the people and government of that country. Our efforts must be evaluated, and your recommendations formulated, with this fact in mind."<sup>73</sup>

Taylor quoted the letter in full in his memoir but did not mention that he helped draft it. He did add that he proceeded to Vietnam under the guidance that U.S. policy had been set forth in NSAM 52 (*see May 11*). "I was not asked to review the objectives of this policy but the means being pursued for their attainment," Taylor wrote. "The question was how to change a losing game and begin to win, not how to call it off."<sup>74</sup>

After a meeting to discuss the taskings for Taylor and the mission, General Lemnitzer cabled Admiral Felt that Kennedy had "expressed concern over [the] build-up of stories to [the] effect [that the] U.S. is contemplating sending combat forces to Vietnam. He feels that too much emphasis is being put on this aspect and could well result in a tremendous letdown in Vietnamese morale if they expected such action and we decided otherwise." Lemnitzer explained that "emphasis publicly is being put on [the] fact [that] Taylor will review [the] entire situation, particularly to determine if increase[s] in our current efforts are called for. However, you should know (and this is to be held most closely) General Taylor will also give [the] most discreet consideration to [the] introduction of U.S. Forces if he deems such action absolutely essential."<sup>75</sup>

Kennedy asked Rostow to review the political situation. Rostow recalled that the president "wanted my judgment on whether the Viet Cong had nationalism on their side. Did the people of South Vietnam really want Ho Chi Minh?" Rostow said that Kennedy "kept coming back to the fact that the French put in more than 250,000 good troops and were run out." At that time, neither Kennedy nor Rostow could envision the United States sending a force that large, so the key question remained whether the South Vietnamese would fight for themselves. According to Rostow, Kennedy referenced his visit to Vietnam a decade earlier and the lack of support he found among the Vietnamese for the fight against the communists.<sup>76</sup>

Undersecretary of State George Ball noted that even though he considered Rostow a longtime friend, Rostow's inclusion on the review team worried him. Ball thought that Rostow was "unduly fascinated by

<sup>73.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:327.

<sup>74.</sup> Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 226. For Taylor's draft of the letter, see *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:345–46; for discussion of how Kennedy modified the draft, see Shulimson, *JCS and Vietnam*, 1:118.

<sup>75.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:362–63.

<sup>76.</sup> Rostow interview (1964), 81. For then-Representative Kennedy's visit to Vietnam in October 1951, see Williams, USAF in Southeast Asia, 1:57–58.

the then faddish theories about counter-insurgency and that intriguing new invention of the professors, 'nation building.'"<sup>77</sup>

Also on October 13, Colonel King of the 4400th CCTS arrived in Honolulu to brief Pacific Command on Jungle Jim's capabilities. King had been told that lieutenant colonels from USAF headquarters at the Pentagon would do the talking, but Admiral Felt addressed most of his questions to King. The colonel recalled that Felt initially seemed skeptical but "finally became convinced that we were serious and that we could do as we said we could." Felt sent King and the headquarters officers on to Vietnam to brief the MAAG and Ambassador Nolting. According to King, General McGarr "was very interested in getting airlift capability and some strike-force capability." Nolting's most significant request was that Farm Gate aircraft bear VNAF insignia.<sup>78</sup>

King inspected several airfields as potential bases for Jungle Jim operations and got approval from McGarr to use Bien Hoa (*see Nov. 14*). Upon returning to Hawaii to debrief with Pacific Command and PACAF, Felt told King to return stateside and prepare his airmen to embark as soon as possible (*see Oct. 11, 28, Nov. 5*).<sup>79</sup>

King recalled that throughout this trip, "It was never mentioned that we would have the responsibility of training VNAF." In fact, in all the meetings with Pacific Command, PACAF, the MAAG, and Ambassador Nolting, "I was never told . . . what I was supposed to do." He had, however, been "told specifically" that training "wasn't our job." When he returned to the states and met for an hour with General LeMay, the USAF chief of staff was "very specific in his instructions," according to King. LeMay had been involved in setting up the training and capabilities of the 4400th (see Apr. 14) and wanted the unit available for offensive operations to support the MAAG, the CIA mission, and the embassy. According to King, LeMay told him that "our sole job [was] to be a combat-capable force." King said later that "I always assumed that training of the nationals was a cover story." As LeMay put it in 1972, the United States "certainly didn't want to come out with the announcement that this outfit was going over to go into combat, but this is exactly what they were doing, and what they were sent over there for," with the full knowledge of Secretary McNamara and the Joint Chiefs.80

**October 15**: On the day the Taylor-Rostow group left Washington, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* carried stories citing unnamed

<sup>77.</sup> George W. Ball, The Past Has Another Pattern (New York: Norton, 1982), 365.

<sup>78.</sup> King interview, 17-18, 25 (1st quote, 18; 2d quote, 25); Futrell, Advisory Years, 81.

<sup>79.</sup> King interview, 18–20; Futrell, Advisory Years, 81; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:187–88.

<sup>80.</sup> King interview, 20–21, 27–29, 126 (1st quote, 20; 2d–3d, 5th quotes, 21; 4th quote, 27); Williams, *LeMay on Vietnam*, 73 (final quote).

administration sources who were reporting that President Kennedy was extremely reluctant to send troops to Vietnam. Authors of the *Pentagon Papers* later speculated that Kennedy himself was either the source of the information or had approved its release, in part as a public answer to word that Diem was going to ask for U.S. forces (*see Oct. 13*).<sup>81</sup>

All members of the Taylor-Rostow contingent received a folder that contained a memorandum of this date. The document covered twenty possible military personnel and equipment scenarios it described as "preliminary estimates which were prepared, in the limited time available, at action officer level in DOD, the Joint Staff, and the Services." The first suggestion was to deploy a U.S. combat unit to train ARVN troops. Air involvement, not mentioned until much farther down the list, included providing the VNAF with jets and/or with STOL (short takeoff and landing) aircraft, the potential use of U.S. military aircraft for logistics support, and for the United States to "undertake [a] defoliant spray program."<sup>82</sup>

**October 16**: At Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu, Admiral Felt briefed the Taylor-Rostow group on his views of the situation in Southeast Asia. He discussed the possibility of the introduction of U.S. combat forces into Vietnam, indicating that at that time, he favored limiting troop deployment to logistics support, which could include helicopter and engineering units.<sup>83</sup>

Rostow put in a memorandum his request that Pacific Command prepare a plan for "limited but systematic harassment by U.S. naval and air power of North Vietnam." Rostow did not envision sending U.S. troops north of the 17th parallel "for sustained fighting," but engagement "might include hit-and-run naval and air action to place and remove landing parties to destroy key military bases and installations" (*see Nov. 2*).<sup>84</sup>

The Joint Chiefs already had tasked Felt with developing a larger concept in case the communists in Vietnam moved into "open hostilities on a large scale," a document Pacific Command came to call the Vietnam Win Plan.<sup>85</sup>

**October 18**: On the day of the arrival of the high-profile U.S. review mission, Diem declared a state of emergency in South Vietnam, and the national assembly voted to give him emergency powers.<sup>86</sup>

Also on the 18th, General Lemnitzer sent a memorandum to Taylor regarding "allegations that the United States is overtraining the Vietnamese

<sup>81.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:120.

<sup>82.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:377-79.

<sup>83.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:123.

<sup>84.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:381–82.

<sup>85.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:170-71.

<sup>86.</sup> Cooper, Lost Crusade, 179; Miller, Misalliance, 228; FRUS 1961-63, 1:392.



Maxwell Taylor meeting with Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon in October 1961. Taylor later wrote in his memoir that he proceeded to Vietnam with the understanding that he was there to figure out how to improve the situation. "The question was how to change a losing game and begin to win," he wrote, "not how to call it off." Taylor, Swords and Ploughshares.

Army for a Korea-type war with little or nothing being done to meet the terrorist problem in Vietnam." Instead of directly addressing this longstanding criticism of the U.S. Army-dominated MAAG (*see Feb. 29, 1960; June 1, 1960*), the chairman of the Joint Chiefs focused on the success the British had in Malaya in training local police to counter insurgency, and on South Vietnamese interest in what had worked in Malaya. He was skeptical that similar concepts would work in the evolving strategic hamlet program (*see Mid-1961*). "With respect to training the Vietnamese Army for the 'wrong war," Lemnitzer noted only that "it seems clear that in recent months the insurgency in South Vietnam has developed far beyond the capacity of police control." The general hoped Taylor could clarify for both the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments "the question of police or military organization for combatting Viet Cong insurgency."<sup>87</sup>

On October 18 as well, Admiral Felt sent the Joint Chiefs a list of military options short of introducing combats forces in Vietnam. These included rapid deployment of the Jungle Jim detachment (*see Nov. 5*), accelerated delivery of T–28s for the VNAF for close air support (*see Dec. 11*), increased photo reconnaissance (*see Oct. 20–Nov. 21*), deployment of two USA helicopter companies to aid in airlift and transportation (*see Oct. 25, Nov. 17*), and the recommendation that the CIA "expand its contacts in South Vietnam immediately." Felt also suggested infrastructure improvements in Vietnam to support a larger U.S. footprint and shipment of supplies to build up stores in the country in case SEATO troops did deploy.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:324-26.

<sup>88.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:188-89.

**October 18–24**: As part of ongoing consideration of a potential U.S./ SEATO military commitment in Southeast Asia (*see Oct. 5, 11, 13*), senior presidential advisors Taylor and Rostow visited South Vietnam during this week on what proved to be a significant policy-shaping mission for the future of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia (*see Nov. 1, 4, 15, 22*). The small entourage was weighted much more heavily with military representatives than it was with State Department and CIA personnel, and Taylor and Rostow both reported directly to the president, not through Secretaries McNamara or Rusk or the Joint Chiefs.<sup>89</sup>

"When we got there," according to Rostow, "none of us felt that [South Vietnam] could hold for more than three months unless something radical was done." There was not a feeling that the communists were about to overrun the country, but "what alarmed us was, simply, that people were disheartened. They were in a tunnel from which they couldn't escape." Rostow observed that "they didn't know what the hell to do, and [everything] was falling apart. So our first duty was to find ways of buying time."<sup>90</sup>

General Milton of Thirteenth Air Force was the primary USAF representative and the ranking active-duty officer on the review team. "As an Air Force guy," Milton recalled, he had been "warned to view [Taylor] with great suspicion." Milton found him "very fair and very straightforward," however, and he arranged for Taylor to write his trip report at a USAF camp at Baguio in the Philippines. From his time in Saigon, Milton described Diem as a "prisoner" of his palace, "totally isolated from the outside world." Milton's responsibility on the mission was to survey air assets. His main recommendation was that the USAF provide a coordinated tactical air control system, as "there was no semblance of one in Vietnam." Admiral Felt approved the concept in November, and Milton and his Thirteenth Air Force staff began planning Barn Door I, which was operational by the beginning of January 1962.<sup>91</sup>

89. For the Taylor-Rostow mission and the administration's decision-making process in its aftermath, see Shulimson, *JCS and Vietnam*, 1:116–40; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 102–27. Taylor recalled that the trip was "for the purpose of examining the situation, recommending ways to facilitate the attainment of our objectives in South Vietnam, and to make them more feasible than they appeared to be under present circumstances." Taylor said that some in the administration had been urging him to go to Vietnam months earlier but that he had wanted a clearer idea of what President Kennedy and his men hoped to achieve there before he went. Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 71–72. For Taylor's recollections of the mission, see Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 227–44.

90. Rostow interview (1964), 84.

91. Milton interview, 84–85, 91–92, 104–5 (1st–2d quotes, 91; 3d quote, 105; 4th quote, 84); Ralph A. Rowley, *Tactics and Techniques of Close Air Support Operations*, *1961–1973* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1976), 11–12, https://media.defense.gov/2015/Dec/21/2001339344/-1/-1/0/AFD-151221-080-007.PDF. Milton did not think he "had any influence on Taylor at all" as the team compiled its report. "I think he already knew what he wanted to do. He was just trying to find out if I agreed with him." Milton interview, 106.

Lt. Col. Butler Toland, the air attaché at the embassy in Saigon, was not as impressed with Taylor as Milton was. Toland thought that Taylor's thinking was "influenced with Army-type operations" and that his plan was for "just a little bit here and a little bit there." The air attaché also could not believe that the MAAG was "putting this poop out there" to the Taylor-Rostow group, to Washington, and to the press that the South Vietnamese government controlled 75 percent of the countryside. Toland, who was still covertly flying reconnaissance over contested areas, thought it was only 40-45 percent at best and that the "Viet Cong were just at will doing what they wanted."<sup>92</sup>

Taylor had not been pleased that President Kennedy included General Lansdale on the review team and had arranged to get him out of Saigon during the visit (*see Oct. 11*). These plans went awry immediately upon arrival at Tan Son Nhut as Diem had sent a car to pick up Lansdale. While Taylor met with reporters, Lansdale told Rostow that he had been summoned and slipped away for a private audience with the president and his highly influential brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.<sup>93</sup>

Lansdale found Diem "a very different individual than the man I had left in 1956." He believed the brothers had become "the tools, unwittingly so, of the people supplying the information" to them through the elaborate web of political and intelligence organizations that Nhu had created. There was "sort of a glass wall between themselves and the people." Lansdale also suspected that Nhu had "talked himself into thinking that he was brighter than his brother," and Nhu often interrupted to answer questions that Lansdale posed to Diem. Nhu seemed "impatient with his brother on his brother's caution." Lansdale said that Nhu's presence made the normally expansive Diem "very hesitant in his talk."<sup>94</sup>

94. Lansdale interview (1971), 70–71 (1st–5th quotes); Lansdale interview (1970), 119 (6th quote). The trip was the last time Lansdale saw Diem. He observed in the 1971 interview (p. 72) that "by the time of his overthrow and death in '63, I think the change had become set in concrete and had probably gone much further than anything I ever saw. From what people were telling me about Diem in '63, he sounded like a stranger to me from the man I knew. But what caused that, I really don't know." Lansdale noted in another interview that when he got back to Washington after the Taylor-Rostow mission, he wrote Diem a letter "pointing out my personal concern for him as a friend. . . . His alienating himself from his people and from the political groups and everything was a matter of very deep concern to me." Lansdale also feared that Nhu was sanitizing and controlling the information that Diem received. Lansdale interview (1969), 73–74. Ambassador Nolting thought the opinion that Diem was becoming more isolated, which grew more widespread in 1962 and repeated by U.S. media, was a "mistake" and an "injustice" and thought Diem and Nhu were actually less isolated than they had been from how they were when he arrived in May 1961. Nolting interview (1970), 77.

<sup>92.</sup> Toland interview, 97–98. Colonel King of the 4400th CCTS, who arrived in Vietnam in mid-November, echoed Toland, observing that "the Viet Cong controlled a hell of a lot of the country that nobody was willing to admit it controlled." King added that he "didn't find anybody in the MAAG . . . [who] had any realization of what the insurgency problem was or how to combat it." King interview, 80, 122. For Taylor's concern about the quality of intelligence, see Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 237–38.

<sup>93.</sup> Lansdale interview (1970), 116-17; Lansdale interview (Sept. 1981), 42.

After asking what he could expect from Taylor, Diem told Lansdale that he was thinking about requesting U.S. troops (*see Oct. 13*). "Have you reached that point in your affairs that you're going to need them to stay alive?" Lansdale recalled asking his old friend. Nhu spoke up, saying ""this is to stabilize . . .' or something or some crap," according to Lansdale. "I asked your brother this," Lansdale interjected. Diem conceded that he had not. "Stay with that, then," said Lansdale, who feared that the introduction of U.S. forces would lead the United States down the same path where the French had failed.<sup>95</sup>

Lansdale did not mention in his interviews whether he or Diem broached the possibility of Lansdale's return to Vietnam at this meeting. In a memorandum for Taylor on "Unconventional Warfare" on October 23, however, Lansdale wrote that "the spark" that the South Vietnamese needed "could well be to place the right Americans into the right areas of the Vietnamese government to provide operational guidance." He suggested allowing the Vietnamese to name Americans who they trusted. Diem did just that in his last meeting with Taylor and Rostow on October 25, asking for Lansdale to be sent back to Saigon. When Ambassador Nolting cabled the suggestion to the State Department, someone wrote in the margin of the deciphered message, "No. No. NO!" The review team discussed the idea and included a passing reference to it in their report (*see Nov. 3*). The concept resurfaced after Diem kept asking General McGarr and Nolting about Lansdale (*see Nov. 25*).<sup>96</sup>

Taylor and Rostow found Diem droning and evasive. When Taylor asked the South Vietnamese president during their first meeting why he had changed his position on the possible introduction of U.S. troops, Diem pointed to the deteriorating situation in Laos and what he believed to be increased communist infiltration through that country. Taylor stressed during multiple sessions with Diem that South Vietnam needed an overall plan to confront the insurgency that included political and economic reforms as well better use of military resources. Diem dodged Taylor's point and eventually claimed that he had a strategic plan of his own. Taylor asked that Diem provide a written copy, which he never did.<sup>97</sup>

In addition to meetings with South Vietnamese political and military leaders in Saigon, as well as with the MAAG—from which Taylor got an "unfavorable impression" of McGarr—the U.S. contingent also toured

<sup>95.</sup> Lansdale interview (Sept. 1981), 42–43 (quotes); Lansdale interview (1970), 121; Currey, *Lansdale*, 236–38. Lansdale told the 1981 interviewer (p. 43) that "I'd seen the French there and I figured we'd do much what the French did. Even with good intentions and everything, we'd be dirty foreigners. It was a country that didn't get along well with foreigners."

<sup>96.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:419, 432; Milton interview, 110-11.

<sup>97.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:391-92; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:125.

defenses along the Demilitarized Zone at the 17th parallel and flew over flooded areas in the Mekong delta south of Saigon. The latter expedition gave Taylor an idea: perhaps a U.S. military force could be introduced under the guise of a humanitarian effort. Taylor believed that South Vietnam needed U.S. troops in some form because of the faltering stability, but, as he later wrote in his memoirs, he had "no enthusiasm" for the use of U.S. Army forces "in ground combat in this guerrilla war." He "doubted the adaptability of our large units to the requirements of jungle warfare." Saigon CIA station chief William Colby thought Taylor's flood-control pretense for sending troops was "bizarre."<sup>98</sup>

The final Taylor-Rostow meeting with Diem included much discussion of air assets. Diem wanted helicopters (*see Oct. 25*), which Taylor thought would have to be introduced in the form of U.S. helicopter units. Nguyen Dinh Thuan, the secretary of state, asked about B–26s and T–28s. Taylor did not think the VNAF was adequately using the bombers it already had and saw no need for sending more. He did note the possible deployment of aircraft for reconnaissance purposes (*see Oct. 20–Nov. 21*). Diem brought up the question of crop-spraying capability, renewing focus on program development that led to Operation Ranch Hand (*see Oct. 19, 22, Nov. 3, 7*). Thuan also expressed concern over the growing communist presence at the airhead the Royal Lao Army had abandoned at Tchepone (*see Oct. 13*).<sup>99</sup>

**October 19**: A Joint Staff report of this date contained a proposal from the Combat Development and Test Center in Saigon (*see Aug. 10*) for a massive spraying program that would have defoliated nearly half of South Vietnam. The projected cost was \$75 to \$80 million, with chemical usage beyond the capacity of U.S. production. The test center submitted a scaled-down prospectus just days later (*see Oct. 22*).<sup>100</sup>

**October 20–November 21**: While the Taylor-Rostow team was in Saigon, PACAF deployed four RF–101s to Tan Son Nhut for a reconnaissance operation labeled Pipe Stem. It was scheduled for eight days but was extended to a month, during which time the aircraft flew sixty-seven sorties over Vietnam and southern Laos. The cover for the introduction of these jet aircraft into Vietnam—still forbidden by the Geneva accords—was that they were there on a humanitarian mission to photograph the

<sup>98.</sup> Shulimson, *JCS and Vietnam*, 1:127–30; Taylor interview, 14–15 (1st quote); Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 238 (2d–4th quotes); Colby, *Lost Victory*, 98 (5th quote). William Trueheart, a senior official at the U.S. embassy in Saigon, surveyed the flooded Mekong delta with a U.S. Army engineer, who concluded that "he couldn't see anything for American engineers to do and perform a useful service there." Strober and Strober, "*Let Us Begin Anew*," 412–13.

<sup>99.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:431-33.

<sup>100.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 14-15.

widespread flooding. Operation Able Mable, flying out of Don Muang in Bangkok, took over the reconnaissance over Vietnam in November (*see Nov. 10*), although the photo processing cell that Pipe Stem had brought with it remained at Tan Son Nhut.<sup>101</sup>

**October 21**: Admiral Felt responded to a request from the Joint Chiefs for comment on a potential defoliation program in Vietnam (*see Oct. 12, 19, 22*). He said that he could not predict the results of such an effort, adding that he was dubious of the potential effectiveness of a massive program to defoliate the entire border area because troops were not available to adequately patrol the region.<sup>102</sup>

**October 22**: The MAAG forwarded to Washington a revised proposal from the Combat Development and Test Center in Saigon for an aerial spraying program (*see Oct. 19*). The effort as outlined was to be carried out over three phases. NLF-supporting manioc and rice crops would be targeted in the first round, jungle in high-concentration NLF areas in the second, and border areas with suspected infiltration in the third. Projected cost for the operation was \$4 to 6.5 million. This plan became the basis for the standing up of Operation Ranch Hand, but targeting evolved considerably before the first missions in January 1962 (*see Nov. 3, Dec. 28*).<sup>103</sup>

**October 25**: General McGarr, who had been disappointed by the trooplift capability of the single VNAF helicopter squadron, recommended that the United States send two Army helicopter squadrons to Vietnam. Diem also stressed the desire for helicopters on the same date. Taylor echoed the need in his report, and two H–21 companies sailed from the United States within a month (*see Nov. 22, Dec. 11, 25*). General Milton recalled that the Army sent representatives to lobby Taylor for the helicopter deployment while Taylor and Rostow were writing their report in Baguio, Philippines.<sup>104</sup>

Also on the 25th, on the way from Saigon to Bangkok, the aircraft carrying the Taylor-Rostow team flew over the two airfields in the Laos panhandle where U.S. military planners had said that U.S. troops could be inserted. The president had insisted that they be inspected "to assess their operational condition," according to Rostow. Taylor gave his opinion that they were sound enough to be used.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>101.</sup> PACAF History, July–December 1961, v. 1, 2:20–21.

<sup>102.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:190.

<sup>103.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 15-16.

<sup>104.</sup> Bowers, Tactical Airlift, 45; FRUS 1961-63, 1:431; Milton interview, 92.

<sup>105.</sup> Rostow, Diffusion of Power, 274-75 (quote); Taylor, Swords and Plowshares, 240.

**October 26**: The Office of General Counsel of the Defense Department issued its option that "introduction of U.S. troops for the purposes of flood control would still constitute a violation of the Geneva Accords" by the South Vietnamese government. Taylor had cabled Washington about the flood-relief cover on the 25th.<sup>106</sup>

On the same date, Ambassador Averell Harriman, leader of the U.S. delegation at the Geneva conference on Laos (*see May 16*), cabled President Kennedy and Secretary Rusk that an agreement on Laos was "almost within our grasp." He strongly cautioned against the introduction of U.S./SEATO troops into Laos (*see Oct. 5*), fearing that "it will be difficult to prevent extremely dangerous escalation and at best will have forces bogged down indefinitely." Harriman added that sending troops into South Vietnam "would not be as dangerous or without terminus and would have [the] possibility of far more worldwide approval."<sup>107</sup>

**October 28**: Admiral Felt requested that the Farm Gate detachment prepare for departure as soon as possible, without waiting for additional gear (*see Nov. 5, 14*).<sup>108</sup>

**October 30**: The Soviets, who had just resumed atmospheric testing (*see Aug. 31*), detonated the largest nuclear device ever tested. A USAF KC–135 sent to monitor the blast collected data that led U.S. scientists to estimate the explosion at fifty-seven megatons, although Soviet experts later claimed their yield was fifty megatons. The bomb, which remains the largest ever detonated, produced a mushroom cloud forty miles high.<sup>109</sup>

**October 31**: Ambassador Nolting cabled the State Department that "our conversations over [the] past ten days with Vietnamese in various walks of life show [a] virtually unanimous desire for [the] introduction [of] U.S. forces into Vietnam." Most of the people with whom embassy personnel had talked were thinking of U.S. troops more as a "reassuring presence" in the face of a "serious morale decline among the populace" than a force to directly fight insurgents.<sup>110</sup>

At the same time, Nolting later recalled that during this general period, including a December 1961 trip to Washington during which he briefed

<sup>106.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:330 (quote); FRUS 1961-63, 1:430.

<sup>107.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 24:481-82.

<sup>108.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 81.

<sup>109. &</sup>quot;Big Ivan, The Tsar Bomba ('King of Bombs'), The World's Largest Nuclear Weapon," Nuclear Weapon Archive, September 3, 2007, http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Russia/TsarBomba.html; Stephen Dowling, "The Monster Atomic Bomb that was Too Big to Use," BBC.com, August 16, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170816-the-monster-atomic-bomb-that-was-too-big-to-use.

<sup>110.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:456-57.

President Kennedy, that he worked to tamp down calls for more rapid escalation. "For gosh sakes, don't do this," he remembered saying. "There are a lot of things that need curing, and there are a lot of things that need treatment," he said, relating the problems in Vietnam to the approach of a country doctor. "But let's treat them one by one, little by little, curing up each one, rather than throwing it into a big fit, on the theory that if it turns into a real war, we can win that one because we know how to fight real wars."<sup>111</sup>



Spray-equipped C–123s at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, awaiting orders to deploy to Vietnam to begin the operation that became known as Ranch Hand. Because of delays in the decisions related to the mission, these aircraft did not reach Vietnam until early January 1962. *USAF*.

# Countering Insurgency November–December 1961

The John Kennedy administration faced difficult decisions regarding Vietnam during the final months of 1961. Senior aides Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow returned from their fact-finding mission in October advocating for deployment of 8,000 U.S. troops, in addition to a number of other measures. Weeks of debate followed, with the president ultimately deciding against a larger-unit force deployment but committing to significant increases in aid, including USAF airlift and multiple USA helicopter squadrons.

The North Vietnamese government was taken aback by the boost of U.S. support, particularly in-uniform Americans manning and maintaining aircraft. Hanoi chastised its southern compatriots for too rashly expanding engagement but also pushed the first larger force southward to augment the NLF/PLAF. The irony of the situation was that by its actions to counter the perceived infiltration problem, the United States directly contributed to creating an actual one.

In November 1961, the USAF 4400th CCTS Jungle Jim detachment reached Vietnam to begin the Farm Gate operations, well ahead of when anyone at higher levels had determined exactly what the unit's mission should be. Debate also continued in Washington during November and December about the spray flight deployment that was evolving into Operation Ranch Hand. Senior officials had concerns from the beginning that the sorties might be labeled "chemical warfare." The Air Force also won an interservice dispute with the Army over airlift capability when the Pentagon approved dispatch of a C–123 squadron for Project Mule Train.

As assets and personnel in Vietnam increased, so did concern for their oversight. Discussion began in Washington during this time about the need for a military command to supersede the MAAG, ultimately resulting in the establishment of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in February 1962. Within the Air Force, PACAF stood up 2d Advanced Echelon (2d ADVON) of Thirteenth Air Force in November 1961 to

exercise operational control over all PACAF units deployed on mainland Southeast Asia.

# 1961

**November**: The Soviets temporarily suspended supply shipments to North Vietnam that were intended for Laos because of concerns that the Vietnamese were redirecting the materials to the NLF in South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

**November 1**: Maxwell Taylor, the president's senior military advisor, cabled his Vietnam findings and "personal recommendations" to President John Kennedy. His overriding thought was that the United States should introduce a military task force into South Vietnam for offensive reinforcement, under the guise of flood relief. Taylor envisioned that the ARVN would still lead the counter-guerrilla effort, but he concluded that deployment of U.S. troops was "an essential action if we are to reverse the present downward trend of events."<sup>2</sup>

On the same date, Adm. Harry Felt, the CINCPAC, told the Joint Chiefs of Staff that even though the South Vietnamese government had not satisfied any of the requirements the United States had set forth in the counterinsurgency plan (*see Jan. 4, Feb. 13*), he believed that the U.S. military should not slow the buildup of the South Vietnamese forces. He hoped the visit of the Taylor-Rostow team would prompt Diem to be more compliant. Felt reported that the ARVN was on pace for a strength of 175,000 men by the end of the year (*see Dec. 31*).<sup>3</sup>

**November 2**: Thirteenth Air Force activated a detachment at Don Muang airfield in Bangkok, Thailand, that became Det 10 of 2d Advanced Echelon (2d ADVON) when Thirteenth Air Force established that entity two weeks later (*see Nov. 15*). Det 10 launched with planned staffing of 52 officers and 246 enlisted under command of Col. James J. England. The unit reached full staffing by December 6, with airmen drawn from Thirteenth and Fifth Air Forces. Det 10 had operational control of Detachment 1, 5th Tactical Control Group, and Detachment 4, 405th Fighter Wing, which flew air defense missions (*see Aug. 27*).<sup>4</sup>

On the same date, in response to Walt Rostow's request (*see Oct. 16*), Admiral Felt presented a basic outline of air and naval concepts by which

<sup>1.</sup> Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 122.

<sup>2.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:331-42 (1st quote, 331; 2d quote, 337).

<sup>3.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:177.

<sup>4.</sup> O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis (A Sequel)," 21-25; PACAF History, July-December 1961, v. 1, 2:22.

the U.S. military might harass North Vietnam. Suggestions included hitting "key military targets," "fighter sweeps" to destroy supplies bound for the NLF in the south, shooting down communist supply aircraft, sinking a ship in Haiphong harbor, and mining the harbor.<sup>5</sup>

Also on the 2d, Sen. Mike Mansfield, the Senate majority leader and one of the most respected voices in political circles on Asian affairs, sent a memorandum to President Kennedy as the White House prepared to receive the Taylor-Rostow report. Mansfield saw U.S. troop deployment to South Vietnam as a "last resort" that "should be approached with the greatest caution." He thought sending troops at that time would be a mistake and would "play completely into the hands of the Soviet Union."<sup>6</sup>

**November 3**: The members of the Maxwell Taylor-Walt Rostow review mission to Vietnam (*see Oct. 18–24*) presented their report to President Kennedy at the White House. Kennedy thanked all the members of the team for their service but had only Taylor remain for a full debriefing. Before meeting with Taylor, the president pulled Brig. Gen. Edward Lansdale aside and told him that he had another task for him that took priority over any post-trip analysis (*see Nov. 25*). Lansdale took no part in the November discussions of the next steps in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

The lengthy report and attachments made the case for increased U.S. support for the flagging South Vietnamese effort against the communists. The consensus of the review team was that the United States should continue to back Diem's government, albeit with bolstering from U.S. advisors to help stabilize it, as Lansdale had suggested (*see Oct. 18–24*). Most significantly, as Taylor had already told Kennedy, he was recommending the insertion of a U.S. military task force (*see Nov. 1*). Taylor later wrote that he went through the document with the president paragraph by paragraph to explain "the meaning and justification for my recommendations." According to Taylor, the purpose of the program

<sup>5.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:465-66.

<sup>6.</sup> Ibid., 1:467-69.

<sup>7.</sup> Ibid., 1:477 n. 1; Lansdale interview (1970), 120. In an interview, Maj. Gen. Theodore Milton described the formulation of the document while the team debriefed at Baguio. He called Rostow "the most prolific writer I have ever seen" and said "he wrote the report. Taylor went back over it and made it read exactly the way he wanted it to read, but Rostow would turn out an entire draft every evening, dictating. He would keep about three secretaries busy. He had a typical professorial ability to lecture. He took all of our inputs—everything. I wouldn't be able to find a word that I recognized as my own in that report, because it was all rewritten in Rostow's style. But he took all of our stuff, Lansdale's and whoever's, used it, and put it together." Milton interview, 107. Ambassador Nolting said in 1966 that he "agreed very much with the thrust of their report to President Kennedy," although he noted that there were "some things" they added to their argument after they left Saigon that he "would not have included and was not completely in accord with." The document did, however, have "the essential point that I thought was necessary—namely, that we should be in an advisory role and not try to move into the driver's seat." Nolting interview (1966), 9–10.



Maxwell Taylor, the military representative of the president, returned from his October 1961 inspection tour of Vietnam advocating for the deployment of 8,000 U.S. troops under the cover story that they would be aiding in flood relief. Taylor had no idea at the time how much his subsequent half decade would be devoted to Vietnam, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (October 1962–July 1964) and as ambassador to South Vietnam (July 1964–July 1965). He is shown here in April 1965 while ambassador. *Johnson Library*.

outlined was three-fold: "restoring national confidence in South Vietnam, improving the use of the resources presently available there, and bridging the time-gap required to increase the effectiveness of the Vietnamese forces." Administration debate on what policies to implement ran for three weeks before the White House issued NSAM 111 (*see Nov. 4, 11, 15, 22*).<sup>8</sup>

Also on November 3, the Joint Chiefs recommended the MAAGproposed aerial defoliation plan to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (*see Oct. 22, Nov. 7*). The service leaders cautioned, however, that "care

8. FRUS 1961–63, 1:477–532; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:132–40; Taylor, Swords and Plowshares, 245 (quotes). According to Rufus Phillips, who had served on Lansdale's team in Vietnam in the mid-1950s, Lansdale came away from the Taylor-Rostow mission with a fairly radical idea that did not make it into the report. He wanted to "jump-start counterinsurgency on a popular basis—that is, by arming existing natural resistance groups such as the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, the Catholics, and the indigenous tribes on the High Plateau. He reasoned that this would build a popular base for counterinsurgency. If it were done carefully, he thought, he could get Diem's agreement," even though it would oblige Diem to reach out to groups he had repressed. Phillips, Why Vietnam Matters, 104. There had been some discussion in South Vietnam as early as February 1960 of potentially rearming the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. FRUS 1958–60, 1:295. must be taken to assure that the United States does not become the target for charges of employing chemical or biological warfare."<sup>9</sup>

**November 4**: A day after the White House received the Taylor-Rostow report, a front-page story in the *New York Times* noted that President Kennedy was "strongly opposed to the dispatch of American combat troops to South Vietnam."<sup>10</sup>

On the same date, in a meeting with national security principals not including the president, Taylor told the group that based on his initial conversation with Kennedy, the president is "instinctively against [the] introduction of U.S. forces" into Vietnam. Secretary McNamara commented that the Taylor-Rostow plan would not be able to "save" South Vietnam without the U.S. troop component. In fact, McNamara did not think 8,000 men would be enough to "convince anyone of our resolve." Vice President Lyndon Johnson asked whether steps short of committing troops would stabilize the situation. If U.S. personnel deployed, Johnson thought the forces would have more impact in the central highlands rather than the Mekong delta. Rostow stated that "there is no soft option" but expressed his preference for "limited actions." Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, believed that the United States "must commit the number of troops required for success."<sup>11</sup>

**November 5**: Detachment 2A of 4400th CCTS, which would carry out the Farm Gate operations, left Florida for staging at Clark Air Base in the Philippines (*see Oct. 11, 13, 28, Nov. 14*). Col. Benjamin King led an element that flew four C–47s to Clark by way of the Aleutian Islands and Guam. Military Air Transport Command carried the rest of the troops in C–124s. The 4400th broke down its T–28s so they could be airlifted in C–124s as well. The detachment was to pick up B–26s in theater (*see Nov. 14*).<sup>12</sup>

Maj. Gen. Theodore Milton, commander of Thirteenth Air Force, "took exception to the Farm Gate crowd when they came to Clark." He recalled that "it just looked like a traveling circus when they came in there. They had this attitude that they were some sort of special forces and they didn't have to pay any attention to little niceties such as shaves, haircuts, clean airplanes, and things of this sort." On the day the unit arrived in the Philippines, Milton remembered that "I went down and took a look at them and said, 'I'll be

<sup>9.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 16.

<sup>10.</sup> Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:136.

<sup>11.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:532-34.

<sup>12.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 81–82; Kissling, Air Commando and Special Operations Chronology, 5–6; Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 27.

back this afternoon, and by then I expect this to look like an Air Force operation." When told that "they didn't work for anybody but General LeMay," Milton informed them that for as long as they were at Clark, "I was General LeMay." He also played a central role in putting in place the command structure that oversaw the 4400th in Vietnam (*see Nov. 15*).<sup>13</sup>

Ground crews at Clark painted over USAF markings on Farm Gate aircraft and replaced them with those of the VNAF, as Ambassador Frederick Nolting had requested (*see Oct. 13*). The men of the 4400th removed all service-identifying patches from their uniforms but retained their rank insignias.<sup>14</sup>

**November 6**: President Kennedy spent much of his meeting with Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister of India, discussing what could be done in Vietnam. According to Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith, "The president and I pressed Nehru hard on what we should do to put down the communist terror. Could Ho Chi Minh do anything? The UN? What about a UN observer corps?" Galbraith noted in his journal that "Nehru was rather negative on all of these matters and most interested in making clear that we should not send in soldiers. I agree heartily, but we need an alternative with a plausible chance of success."<sup>15</sup>

**November 7**: Secretary McNamara expressed ambivalence about the proposed aerial defoliation plan, echoing the Joint Chiefs' concern about potential negative propaganda if the communists presented the missions as chemical attacks (*see Oct. 22, Nov. 3*). On the 6th, Radio Hanoi had broadcast a claim that the South Vietnamese military had used "poison gas" on rice crops near Tay Ninh that had made the locals ill. McNamara noted that the U.S. embassy in Saigon was inquiring if Diem would issue a statement that the spraying would not be harmful to humans or livestock.<sup>16</sup>

With crops in NLF-held areas nearing harvest, however, McNamara approved preparations for the defoliation operation while the government continued consideration of whether to implement it. He ordered the USAF "to provide, on a priority basis, the required aircraft, personnel, and chemicals" and assigned operational control of the project to Admiral Felt and Pacific Command. Felt delegated planning and coordination responsibility to Lt. Gen. Lionel McGarr and the MAAG (*see Nov. 9, 10*).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13.</sup> Milton interview, 94.

<sup>14.</sup> Gleason, *Air Commando Chronicles*, 27. According to Gleason, Farm Gate personnel operated in Vietnam for about a year without USAF identification before TAC insisted that the airmen be in uniform.

<sup>15.</sup> Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal, 214.

<sup>16.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 16, 20.

<sup>17.</sup> Ibid., 16 (quote), 23.



Maj. Gen. Theodore R. Milton (*right*), commander of Thirteenth Air Force, was the senior in-uniform military officer during the Taylor-Rostow review mission in Vietnam in October. He played an increasingly larger role in what was happening in Southeast Asia in the latter months of 1961 as more USAF units staged through Clark Air Base and into his theater of operations in Vietnam. USAF.

On the same date, Ho Chi Minh participated in ceremonies in Moscow marking the forty-fourth anniversary of the Soviet state.<sup>18</sup>

Also on the 7th, at the end of a White House meeting on an unrelated subject, George Ball expressed his concerns to President Kennedy about the Taylor-Rostow recommendations. He said that once the process of committing U.S. troops started, "there would be no end to it." Ball told Kennedy that "within five years we'll have 300,000 men in the paddies and jungles and never find them again." The undersecretary of state was taken aback by the president's response: "George, you're just crazier than hell. That just isn't going to happen."<sup>19</sup>

**November 9**: As the Defense Department continued to consider whether to authorize aerial defoliation spraying in Vietnam (*see Nov. 3, 7*), the Pentagon

<sup>18.</sup> Carl Berger, ed. The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973: An Illustrated Account, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1984), 10.

<sup>19.</sup> Ball, *Past Has Another Pattern*, 366 (quote); Strober and Strober, "*Let Us Begin Anew*," 413. Although Ball generally has been portrayed as an early skeptic of the war, and certainly presented himself as one in his memoir, the memorandum from the November 4 meeting referenced above had Ball arguing for the deployment of a force larger than the recommended 8,000-man one. *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:533.

ordered Tactical Air Command to modify six C–123s for spraying capability and to prepare support for four months of field operations. As planning stood at this time, the aircraft were to be sent to the Farm Gate detachment that was deploying to South Vietnam (*see Nov. 5, 14*). The Army was to provide the chemicals for the projected first phase of the operation, which, if approved, was to target NLF-supporting crops (*see Oct. 22*).<sup>20</sup>

The USAF's Special Aerial Spray Flight (SASF) program at Langley Air Force Base, Virginia, began the organizational preparations, while airmen at Olmsted Air Force Base, Pennsylvania, installed MC–1 "Hourglass" spray tanks on six C–123s. Capt. Carl W. Marshall, the SASF commander, took a core team of six pilots and twelve enlisted men from Langley to Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, home of the C–123s (464th Troop Carrier Wing), and started recruiting pilots and maintenance crews for deployment (*see Nov. 28*). Marshall began his interviews at Pope with men who had volunteered for the 4400th CCTS but had not been selected.<sup>21</sup>

**November 10**: Ambassador Galbraith, who had spent most of the week with President Kennedy, recorded in his journal that "Vietnam is still very much on everyone's mind. The president does not want any overt intervention but desperately needs an alternative." Galbraith told Kennedy that he could return to New Delhi by way of Saigon, an idea the president heartily approved (*see Nov. 17–19*).<sup>22</sup>

On the same date, four RF–101Cs from the 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron began flights out of Don Muang in Bangkok in an operation dubbed Able Mable, which superseded the under-resourced Operation Field Goal (*see Apr. 17, July 17, Oct. 4*). The deployment included pilots and crews for the aircraft, fifty support personnel, and a photo processing cell, all of which became part of a larger detachment stood up a week earlier (*see Nov. 2*). During its first eighty days, Able Mable crews flew 114 sorties over Laos and what the PACAF history described as "a similar number" over Vietnam.<sup>23</sup>

Also on the 10th, Admiral Felt assigned operational control for prospective defoliation missions in Vietnam to PACAF and planning and coordinating responsibility to the MAAG.<sup>24</sup>

24. CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:190.

<sup>20.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 17.

<sup>21.</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>22.</sup> Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal, 218.

<sup>23.</sup> PACAF History, July–December 1961, v. 1, 2:19–20, 22. According to another source, Able Mable flew 130 sorties by the end of 1961. In all, the detachment totaled 720 missions by the time the USAF terminated the program in December 1962. Jacob Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos, 1960–1968* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 5, https://media.defense.gov/2010/Sep/27/2001329814/-1/-1/0/AFD-100927-078.pdf.



The initial Able Mable pilots from the 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, flying RF–101Cs out of Don Muang airfield in Bangkok, Thailand: 1Lt. Frederick G. Muesegaes, Maj. Kenneth E. Harbst, and 1Lt. Jack W. Weatherby in front and Capt. Ralph DeLucia, Capt. William E. Whitten, and 1Lt. John W. Linihan in back. Muesegaes, Weatherby, Linihan, and Whitten also flew in the preceding operation in October, which had been known as Field Goal. *USAF*.

**November 11**: After a week during which the White House twice delayed meetings to discuss follow-up on the Taylor-Rostow recommendations and a carousel of memoranda on the subject circulated through State and Defense, the national security principals assembled with President Kennedy for the first time since Taylor's return to explore the next steps. Kennedy made clear that "troops are a last resort," and if sent, they "should be SEATO forces." He believed there would be significant congressional opposition in either case. The president wanted to know how to make the Diem government "more palatable." He indicated willingness to sign off on language that committed the United States to the objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to communism, but not to other verbiage that declared that the loss of South Vietnam would undermine U.S. credibility internationally and lead to domestic problems.<sup>25</sup>

25. FRUS 1961–63, 1:577–78 (quotes); Kaiser, American Tragedy, 107–15. For the memorandum that was the basis of discussion at the meeting, see U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:359–66.



President Kennedy with McGeorge Bundy, his national security advisor. Bundy had taught U.S. foreign policy courses in Harvard's government department and subsequently served as dean of arts and sciences. During most of 1961, he had left issues dealing with Vietnam and Laos to his deputy, Walt Rostow, but Bundy became more engaged in November during consideration of the Taylor-Rostow recommendations. *Kennedy Library*.

Robert Kennedy, the U.S. attorney general, thought his brother should make a public statement that "we are not sending combat troops, not committing ourselves to combat troops." He echoed the president's inclination to place more emphasis on multilateral action through SEATO. General Lemnitzer, whose sparse notes are the only record that survives of this consequential meeting, indicated that he and Secretary McNamara made clear that they did not believe the program Taylor and Rostow had outlined, including the 8,000 troops, would be enough to "solve this problem and that further action will be required." Vice President Johnson said a line needed to be "clearly drawn" in Vietnam, noting that one had not been in Laos.<sup>26</sup>

26. FRUS 1961-63, 1:577-78.

On the same date, in a memorandum for the president on potential diplomatic-political courses of action in Vietnam, Ambassador-at-large Averell Harriman wrote that "if the government of South Vietnam continues [to be] a repressive, dictatorial, and unpopular regime, the country will no longer retain its independence, nor can the United States afford to stake its prestige there."<sup>27</sup>

In the same time frame, Ted Sorensen, special counsel to the president, wondered in a note for Kennedy whether Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev would regard increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam as "more stupid than bold." Sorensen suggested that Khrushchev might "feel we are sufficiently weakened and diverted to permit him further moves."<sup>28</sup>

**November 13**: In a telephone conversation, Taylor updated Secretary of State Dean Rusk on the status of the Taylor-Rostow recommendations. Taylor said that McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor, was having difficulty crafting a document that took into account the divergent opinions expressed at the November 11 meeting. Taylor told Rusk that Bundy was concerned that President Kennedy "does not know what he is approving." Some of the concepts under discussion were "unthought-out recommendations," according to Taylor, who believed he and Rusk needed to tell the president that "this means so-and-so" (*see Nov. 15*).<sup>29</sup>

On the same date, Secretary McNamara approved a number of measures to aid the South Vietnamese military. These included the tactical air control system that General Milton had identified as a significant need (*see Oct. 18–24, Dec. 4*). McNamara also authorized deployment of sixteen C–123s, a concept that evolved into Project Mule Train after PACAF suggested sending one of its underemployed C–123 squadrons (*see Dec. 4, 11, 28*). The secretary of defense apparently made these decisions based on his interpretation of the November 11 meeting with the president.<sup>30</sup>

Also on the 13th, McNamara directed the Joint Chiefs to develop a plan for a U.S. military command in Vietnam. A MAAG was not authorized to oversee combat operations, a restriction complicated by deployment of Special Forces and the USAF Jungle Jim detachment (*see Nov. 15*). Although the service chiefs expressed doubts whether such a revision in structure was necessary, they gave McNamara a proposal to create a new command under Pacific Command. Debate of this concept continued beyond the end of 1961. Rusk and Ambassador Nolting objected, as did Taylor, General McGarr, and much of the U.S. Army senior leadership.

<sup>27.</sup> Quoted in Bundy interview, 54.

<sup>28.</sup> Sorensen, Counselor, 355.

<sup>29.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:588.

<sup>30.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 93; Bowers, Tactical Airlift, 44-45; Kaiser, American Tragedy, 114.



A Douglas B–26B Invader deployed to Vietnam for Farm Gate. The 4400th CCTS picked up six of these light bombers on Okinawa in late December. These aircraft had been part of the U.S. loan to the French for use in Vietnam during the mid-1950s and had ended up in an Air Asia boneyard. *USAF*.

Rusk and Taylor argued that the establishment of a military command in Vietnam would signal to the international community a U.S. commitment there beyond what President Kennedy was prepared to make. McNamara persisted, however, and the U.S. military stood up Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in February 1962.<sup>31</sup>

**November 14**: McGeorge Bundy told Ambassador Galbraith that President Kennedy had "not made up his mind" on what to do about the Vietnam proposals. Deputy Undersecretary of State Alexis Johnson thought that a "modified intervention" would be part of the plan. Galbraith read the full Taylor-Rostow report and declared it a "curious document," as it called for "vigorous action" but implied that the effort "cannot possibly succeed given the present government in Saigon."<sup>32</sup>

On the same date, Detachment 2A of 4400th CCTS, which would to carry out Farm Gate, began arriving in South Vietnam. The Geneva accords required that all aircraft enter the country at Tan Son Nhut and be recorded by international inspectors, which the Jungle Jim planes did before flying on to Bien Hoa. The unit, which consisted of 41 officers and 115 enlisted under command of Col. Benjamin King, was operationally ready in Vietnam by November 16 but was still awaiting the arrival of much of its aircraft fleet. The initial deployment was for 179 days' temporary duty.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31.</sup> Cosmas, *MACV*, 22–27; Nolting interview (1970), 63–67. As U.S. embassy official William Trueheart put it, "We were convinced we had a political problem to deal with, and this [the establishment of MACV] was the first step in deciding it was a military problem." Strober and Strober, "*Let Us Begin Anew*," 414.

<sup>32.</sup> Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal*, 221–22. For the debate within the administration, see Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 93–100.

<sup>33.</sup> Gleason, *Air Commando Chronicles*, 27; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 81–82; Kissling, *Air Commando and Special Operations Chronology*, 5–6; PACAF History, July–December 1961, v. 1, 2:23. Colonel King recalled that "there was a very long discussion on—and I don't know who finally made the decision—on how long to cut the orders for." King interview, 40.

On his predeployment visit to Vietnam, King had selected Bien Hoa as the Jungle Jim base, with approval from General McGarr (*see Oct.* 13). It was centrally located for the projected areas of operation, was near Saigon, and was relatively safe from insurgent activity. However, Bien Hoa's 5,000-foot runway was substandard and constructed with pierced steel planking that could barely survive B–26 use. Housing was poor and limited, with all Farm Gate personnel initially in tents. The 4400th also had to modernize communications and supply systems as best it could. The USAF air attaché staff from the U.S. embassy under Lt. Col. Butler Toland shared its regional terrain knowledge with the newly arrived unit and made several acclimation flights with the Jungle Jim pilots. King found that Toland and his staff "had much, much more knowledge of what the situation was in Vietnam, politically and tactically, than the MAAG did."<sup>34</sup>

The eight T–28s that the 4400th ferried to Vietnam were retrofitted with armor plating and could carry around 1,500 pounds of bombs and rockets, as well as two .50-caliber machine guns with 350 rounds per gun. These planes were a version of the T-28 that had been borrowed from the USN and were redesignated TF-28s in recognition of their fighter capability. The four C–47s that the unit received in the latter part of November were augmented with tanks for twice the fuel load of stock aircraft. They were also fitted with stronger landing gear to facilitate access to dirt air strips and jet-assisted takeoff (JATO) racks for operations from short runways. The modified C-47s were redesignated as SC-47s. Unfortunately, the weight of the additional fuel and equipment made the planes "much too heavy to perform very well in rough, unprepared, and remote fields," according to Lt. Col. Robert Gleason. The 4400th also picked up six B-26 light bombers in Okinawa toward the end of December. These planes had been part of the U.S. loan to the French for use in Vietnam during the mid-1950s and had ended up in an Air Asia boneyard.<sup>35</sup>

Even though the authorized purpose of the unit's deployment was a training mission (*see Oct. 11*), as noted above (*see Oct. 13*), King had not been so directed, and in fact General LeMay had built the 4400th with other purposes in mind (*see Apr. 14*). King later said that "I don't think

<sup>34.</sup> King interview, 20, 80 (quote); Futrell, Advisory Years, 81-82; Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 28-29.

<sup>35.</sup> Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 16–17 (quote), 30–31; Futrell, Advisory Years, 79, 81; Kissling, Air Commando and Special Operations Chronology, 5–6; King interview, 43–44. Some sources put the initial number of B–26s as four, but Gleason, who commanded the unit at the time they were acquired, said it was six. King had wanted old USN F–8s for the 4400th but found out that the last ones of them had just been destroyed. The F–8s were one-seaters, though, and when Farm Gate received its mandated mission to train VNAF personnel, the two-seat T–28 proved to be far more useful. King later concluded that for Jungle Jim's purposes, "I don't think we could have found a better airplane than the T–28." King interview, 67–69. Gleason (p. 16) wrote that the 4400th also considered the USN A–1E, another single-seat fighter, but the Navy would not release any of the planes to the Air Force.



When Jungle Jim arrived at Bien Hoa in November 1961, all of the personnel for Farm Gate had to be housed in a tent city because of limited facilities at the base. The initial deployment for both officers and enlisted was for 179 days' temporary duty. Gleason, *Air Commando Chronicles*.

it was until after we reached Vietnam that we began to think seriously about setting up a training program." He added that "the guidance was real skimpy," and the 4400th basically was left to its own imagination to develop such a course. King did try to work with the VNAF fighter squadron at Bien Hoa to arrange some sort of training, but he found unwilling partners (*see Early Dec.*).<sup>36</sup>

Guidance was virtually nonexistent. As Gleason later wrote, "It was obvious that we were running well ahead of planning and conceptual thinking that should have preceded our deployment." He added that "Colonel King tried his best to find a niche where we could contribute to the war effort."<sup>37</sup>

One area where King did have direct orders from LeMay was to support the Special Forces. He found, however, that "at the beginning, . . . the Special Forces people were very zealous of their own capability—which they didn't have—and they certainly didn't want to admit that they were dependent upon an Air Force element to do some of the things that they had advertised throughout." The Army, according to King, was "pushing like hell to get their own capability in this area, and they didn't want anybody to know that the Air Force had the capability in existence to support them." Even as the 4400th began aiding Special Forces operations, with air drops to their encampments, Army personnel told King specifically, "Be sure and don't let anybody know that you're supporting us."<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36.</sup> King interview, 8-10 (quotes), Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 41.

<sup>37.</sup> Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 29.

<sup>38.</sup> King interview, 38-39 (quotes), 44.

Diem, who General Lansdale had briefed about the 4400th CCTS (*see Oct. 11*), took a personal interest in Farm Gate operations and met with King two or three times during the five weeks before King turned the detachment over to Gleason and returned stateside (*see Dec. 21*).<sup>39</sup>

Even with VNAF markings on the Farm Gate aircraft, nothing remained secret about the mission. King recalled that after their very first flight in mid-November, within hours, Radio Hanoi welcomed the 4400th by unit name and noted where its planes had flown.<sup>40</sup>

**November 15**: The NSC took up discussion of McGeorge Bundy's redraft of the Vietnam policy document (*see Nov. 13*). President Kennedy expressed little enthusiasm for the memorandum, or for aggressive action in Vietnam in general. According to meeting notes, the president "said that he could even make a rather strong case against intervening in an area 10,000 miles away against 16,000 guerrillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions have been spent for years with no success." Kennedy also "questioned the wisdom of involvement in Vietnam since the basis thereof is not completely clear." Other concerns included the lack of international or congressional support for increased U.S. engagement. The president expressed his "fear of becoming involved simultaneously on two fronts on opposite sides of the world," with West and East still at a standoff over Berlin (*see July 14, Aug. 13*).<sup>41</sup>

Taylor addressed the pessimism with which some had met his mission report and said that he had actually returned from Vietnam "with optimism over what could be done if certain clear-cut actions were taken." The necessary response boiled down to "a revival of Vietnam morale" and the "initiation of the guerrilla suppression program." Secretary McNamara interjected that such a counterinsurgency effort "was in fact complex and that in all probability, U.S. troops, planes, and resources would have to be supplied in additional quantities at a later date."<sup>42</sup>

Kennedy said the discussion needed to center on "what will be done next in Vietnam rather than whether or not the U.S. would become involved." As innocuous as that statement seemed, and even though the president closed the meeting saying that the NSC would take no action at that time on the proposed memorandum, this pronouncement settled the question of whether the United States would deepen its commitment to

<sup>39.</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>40.</sup> Ibid., 45-47.

<sup>41.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:607. Kennedy confidant Ted Sorensen recalled that the president was "constantly asking one advisor or outside expert after another: How can we ever get out? On more than one occasion, he asked whether Vietnam was the right place to fight and take a stand." Sorensen, *Counselor*, 356.

<sup>42.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:609.

South Vietnam. That evening, after Rusk received presidential approval for the documents, the State Department cabled Ambassador Nolting. The ambassador was to meet with Diem and inform him that Kennedy, after consideration of the Taylor-Rostow report, had decided that the United States was prepared to join with South Vietnam "in a sharply increased joint effort" to "avoid further deterioration in the situation" and to "eventually contain and eliminate the threat" to independence. The State Department also sent a letter from Kennedy for Diem as well as a telegram for Nolting that summarized the decisions on the Taylor-Rostow report, including word that the United States would not deploy combat troops at that time.<sup>43</sup>

Kennedy held no other formal meetings on the Vietnam response before approving a national security action memorandum on the subject a week later that significantly expanded the U.S. role (*see Nov. 22*). The program spelled out in NSAM 111 was almost exactly the plan the State Department sent to Nolting on the 15th to present to Diem. Bundy said in 1964 that his sense was that the administration tried to walk the fine line of doing "the maximum amount that did not create a major international noise level and see what happened, and did not create major domestic noise."<sup>44</sup>

Also on November 15, PACAF activated 2d Advanced Echelon (2d ADVON) of Thirteenth Air Force to exercise operational control over all PACAF units deployed in mainland Southeast Asia. According to 2d ADVON's first history, PACAF created the command as a "temporary provisional advance element" of Thirteenth Air Force. It had detachments at Tan Son Nhut (Det 7 [headquarters] and Det 8), Bien Hoa (Det 9), and Don Muang (Det 10), where Thirteenth Air Force had units deployed since April (*see Apr., Nov. 2*). Det 9 was to directly oversee the Farm Gate operations, under the overall 2d ADVON commander.<sup>45</sup>

Brig. Gen. Rollen H. "Buck" Anthis assumed command of 2d ADVON on November 20. On December 1, he also became MAAG Air Force section chief. Admiral Felt and PACAF commander Gen. Emmett O'Donnell

43. Ibid., 1:609–10, 615–18 (1st quote, 609); U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:400–405 (2d–4th quotes); Kaiser, American Tragedy, 120. For Kennedy's reluctance to approve a larger-scale program, see also Bundy interview, 58–60. Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric later said that Kennedy was "very uncomfortable with decision-making in Far East matters. I don't think he had any real feel for it." Strober and Strober, "Let Us Begin Anew," 406.

44. Shulimson, *JCS and Vietnam*, 1:140; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 11:400–405, 419–21; McGeorge Bundy, interview with Richard Neustadt, March, May 1964, transcript, John F. Kennedy Library, 137 (quote), https://www.jfklibrary.org/sites/default/files/archives/JFKOH/Bundy%2C%20McGeorge/JFKOH-MGB-01/JFKOH-MGB-01-TR.pdf.

45. 2d ADVON History, November 1961–October 1962, xvii, 15, 17–18, 32 (quote); Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 95. According to the 2d ADVON History (p. 17), Det 7 was redesigned Headquarters, 2d ADVON, in June 1962, which in October 1962 became Headquarters, 2d Air Division. At the time Thirteenth Air Force stood up the command in November 1961, 2d ADVON "was the parenthetical and unclassified designation for Detachment 7, a then SECRET designation."



Brig. Gen. Rollen H. "Buck" Anthis (*center*) at Tan Son Nhut in November 1961 with his intial 2d ADVON staff. Prior to the standing up of 2d ADVON, Anthis had been vice commander of Thirteenth Air Force under General Milton, to whom he continued to directly report. The Jungle Jim leadership received no advanced notice of the creation of 2d ADVON, and neither did Ambassador Nolting, making for a difficult command situation for Anthis from the start. *USAF*.

worked out this dual-hat arrangement because of the dual-purpose Farm Gate mission (*see Nov. 14, Dec. 26*). By law, MAAGs could not command operational forces, but MAAG-Saigon would oversee Jungle Jim training duties. The projected combat side of Farm Gate would be under PACAF (and ultimately Pacific Command) by way of Thirteenth Air Force. Anthis reported directly to the Thirteenth Air Force commander, General Milton, and also to the MAAG commander, General McGarr. Felt advised Anthis not to create a new headquarters but to operate out of the MAAG. Despite Anthis's position as MAAG Air Force section chief, which to that point had been a permanent-duty billet, the USAF sent him on TDY orders. All 2d ADVON personnel remained on TDY status until well into 1962.<sup>46</sup>

Ambassador Nolting had not been apprised of the creation of 2d ADVON and thought it "incomprehensible" that the U.S. military was organizing a new headquarters without consulting him or the South

<sup>46. 2</sup>d ADVON History, November 1961–October 1962, xvii, 17–18; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 94–95; Rollen H. Anthis, interview with Maj. Samuel E. Riddlebarger and Lt. Col. Valentino Castellina, November 17, 1969, transcript, AFHRA, Iris no. 0104222, p. 23 (hereafter Anthis interview).

Vietnamese government. He told Anthis that 2d ADVON would have to clear any combat operations directly through him (*see Dec. 15*). Nolting's insistence on overall control over the country team, which included the military and the CIA, and the restrictions on what a MAAG was authorized to do added fuel to discussions that led to the formation of a higher-level command three months later (*see Nov. 13*).<sup>47</sup>

Colonel King of the 4400th CCTS had not been told that PACAF intended for Jungle Jim to be under the newly created 2d ADVON. He was operating under verbal orders from General LeMay that he was to report directly to LeMay (see Oct. 11, Nov. 14), who had also told him not to divulge the substance of their conversation to anyone. LeMay had directed King that he was to work primarily with the ambassador and the CIA station chief, William Colby. When Anthis sent Col. Claude G. McKinney Jr. to Bien Hoa as commander of Det 9, 2d ADVON, to take operational control of the 4400th—without meeting with King or notifying him—King "resisted this extremely strongly" and cabled LeMay. King recalled that "it was lack of communication down the line that caused these hard feelings and heated discussions." Ultimately, McKinney ran the administrative and support side of the camp at Bien Hoa while King and his successor, Lieutenant Colonel Gleason (see Dec. 21), commanded the operational side of Farm Gate, with general oversight from Anthis (see Dec. 26). Even with this arrangement in place, tension between the Jungle Jim airmen (who came to be called air commandos) and Anthis and his 2d ADVON staff lingered throughout the deployment, and the 4400th continued to fly covert missions without informing 2d ADVON (see Early Dec., Dec. 26). Anthis did not have a special operations background and "didn't know shit from Shinola about COIN [counterinsurgency] warfare," according to then-Lt. Col. Heinie Aderholt, who was coordinating air operations in Laos and would later supervise air commando training at Hurlburt Field.48

Lieutenant Colonel Toland had a more favorable view of Anthis and credited him with "building up the Vietnamese Air Force, or trying to, and getting equipment and training" for it. King concurred that Anthis was "very emphatic" that the USAF mission should be "to assist the VNAF in establishing a capability." Anthis also managed to get overall command of the VNAF elevated to the general-officer level (*see May*).<sup>49</sup>

King observed that Anthis "had so damn many things to do he was snowed under." As King explained, "2d ADVON was so tied up in instructions from the Air Force side, instructions from the ambassador's

<sup>47.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 94-95.

<sup>48.</sup> King interview, 28–29, 47–49 (1st–2d quotes); Trest, Air Commando One, 124 (3d quote); Futrell, Advisory Years, 96.

<sup>49.</sup> Toland interview, 50-51; King interview, 30.

side, instructions from the MAAG side that they were afraid to move." King conceded that he did not know what Anthis's orders were or what political pressures he faced, but he thought Anthis was "*very* timid" when it came to making decisions about how to deploy the 4400th in an offensive role. King placed more ultimate blame on the Army-dominated leadership of the MAAG than he did on Anthis, but he thought the USAF should have pushed harder for greater combat involvement.<sup>50</sup>

**November 17**: Ambassador Nolting met with Diem to present President Kennedy's decisions on the Taylor-Rostow report (*see Nov. 15*). Diem was taken aback by the emphasis on the need for South Vietnamese governmental reform and told Nolting that he did not want his country to be "a protectorate." The South Vietnamese president talked at length about the difficulty of finding quality people. Nolting initially believed that Diem "took our proposals rather better than I had expected." He learned a few days later from a Vietnamese cabinet member, however, that Diem was "very sad and disappointed." Meanwhile, Ngo Dinh Nhu launched a negative campaign against the U.S. proposals in the Vietnamese press. One Saigon newspaper declared that the United States was attempting to "use Vietnam as a pawn of capitalist imperialism." Diem took two weeks to more or less agree with the U.S. plans (*see Dec. 4*). During the interim, he rekindled efforts to have General Lansdale assigned to Vietnam (*see Nov. 25*).<sup>51</sup>

On the same date, the Joint Chiefs approved the deployment of two USA helicopter companies to Vietnam (*see Oct. 25, Nov. 22*).<sup>52</sup>

**November 17–19**: On his way back to New Dehli, Ambassador Galbraith stopped in Saigon at the request of President Kennedy (*see Nov. 10*). Galbraith had been in the United States as consideration of the Taylor-Rostow report began (*see Nov. 6, 10, 14*), and Kennedy wanted an unvarnished second opinion from a trusted friend and Vietnam skeptic. In his progression westward from Washington, the ambassador met with Admiral Felt in Honolulu. Galbraith recorded that Felt "has little confidence in the Vietnamese army and not much in Diem. But in his view, all can be improved." After his time in Saigon, which coincided with Ambassador Nolting's presentation of the U.S. plan to Diem (*see Nov. 17*), Galbraith wrote the president that South Vietnam was "a can of snakes." He thought Diem was much more concerned about fending off coup attempts than

<sup>50.</sup> King interview, 86 (quotes), 89-92.

<sup>51.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:643–44 (1st–2d quotes), 649–52 (3d quote); Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:142–43 (4th quote); Kaiser, American Tragedy, 123; Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal, 235; Bundy interview, 62–63.

<sup>52.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:189.


President Kennedy appointed John Kenneth Galbraith, a Harvard economics professor and long-time Kennedy confidant, as ambassador to India. Galbraith was in the United States in November 1961 in conjunction with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's visit, and he convinced Kennedy to let him make a fact-finding visit to Saigon on his way back to New Delhi. *Kennedy Library*.

he was about trying to save the country and told Kennedy that "there is scarcely the slightest practical chance that the administrative and political reforms now being pressed upon Diem will result in real change."<sup>53</sup>

53. Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal*, 224–34 (1st quote, 231); Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*, 469–77 (2d quote, 473); Strober and Strober, "*Let Us Begin Anew*," 413–14. Galbraith stated in an interview that when Kennedy sent him to Vietnam, he "had no doubt as to the report he would get back from me. He knew that I was not blessed with an open mind on the subject. Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 80. For Galbraith's reports, see *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 11:406–18; for Rostow's rejoinder to them, see *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:661–63. Rostow wrote in the margin of one of Galbraith's letters to Kennedy that "if Ken means disengage, he better say it." McGeorge Bundy said in 1971 when reviewing some of Galbraith's cables that the ambassador "probably complicated the usefulness of his telegram by telling the president that he's just made a serious mistake. But I really don't recollect." Bundy said that he did "guess that [Kennedy] very much absorbed Galbraith's view that if Diem didn't pan out, the thing to do was to get rid of Diem. And it's at least conceivable that Galbraith's influence comes into play in the later '63 events, which are nearly two years off at this point." Bundy interview, 51, 64–65.

Saigon, according to Galbraith, was "in a modified state of siege," with PLAF forces in the Mekong delta region as close as thirty miles away. Nolting and other senior officials had to be "followed everywhere by a car filled with gun-bearers," even in Saigon. U.S. aid workers had to be accompanied by three cars full of troops for any forays into the countryside. Despite the circumstances, Galbraith found Diem's cabinet ministers not "much perturbed by their state of siege."<sup>54</sup>

Galbraith was incredulous after a MAAG briefing at which he was informed that the insurgents had around 15,000 men at the beginning of the year, that the ARVN claimed to have inflicted 17,000 casualties, but that the PLAF still had 15,000 to 18,000 guerrillas (which Taylor and Rostow also had been told). He concluded that "intelligence on insurgent operations was nonexistent" and could not understand why a collective South Vietnamese force of a quarter million could not subdue a few thousand lightly armed rebels. "If this [troop ratio] were equality," Galbraith wrote the president, "the United States would hardly be safe against the Sioux."<sup>55</sup>

The ambassador recalled in a later interview that "the level of confusion you got talking with the generals was as impressive as anything on that trip." Galbraith thought the U.S. military "was finding its way in Vietnam and was divided between those who saw a real problem and those who had some notion that this was a small insurrection that could be rather easily put down."<sup>56</sup>

**November 21**: In a memorandum for the president, Deputy Secretary Roswell Gilpatric presented the Defense Department's case for aerial defoliation spraying in Vietnam (*see Nov. 3, 7, 9*). After an extended examination of the numerous issues at stake, including whether USAF aircraft and crews would participate overtly or covertly, Gilpatric offered two options: to "avoid the use of this material wholly on the grounds of net adverse local reaction, and particularly of worldwide disapproval," or to "go ahead with a selective and carefully controlled program." The

<sup>54.</sup> Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal, 226-27.

<sup>55.</sup> Galbraith, A Life in Our Times, 472–73 (quotes); Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal, 227. The MAAG still had no intelligence section of its own and got its information from the ARVN. General McGarr had written General Lemnitzer on October 12 with the 17,000 PLAF strength estimate but said the number had been only 10,000 at the beginning of the year, with 4,000 of the increase since July. *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:355. The CINCPAC history included a breakout estimate by zone that totaled 17,075. CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:169–70. See also the accounting in the National Intelligence Estimate of October 5. U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:293. The Vietnamese official history of the conflict did not divide PLAF regulars from "local force troops" when listing a total strength of 24,500 in the south by the end of 1961. The same source claimed an additional 100,000 "self-defense guerrillas" on the communist side in the south. Victory in Vietnam, 83. This book (pp. 455–56 n. 16) also included a list of bases established in the south during 1961.

<sup>56.</sup> Strober and Strober, "Let Us Begin Anew," 414.

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The CINCPAC Command History for 1961 included breakout estimates of PLAF (Viet Cong) strength by tactical zone. This document, undoubtedly generated from numbers supplied by the MAAG, estimated an insurgent total of 17,075 at the end of 1961. The postwar official Vietnamese history placed the number at 24,500, although it is unclear whether that figure included some or all of the 5,000 men who began moving into the south from the north in December. The MAAG had been reporting the estimated total as 17,000 since at least October.

Defense Department advised that Secretary Rusk be consulted on potential international reaction to the program (*see Nov. 24*) before the president made a decision (*see Nov. 30*).<sup>57</sup>

**November 22**: While still awaiting concurrence from Diem's government (*see Nov. 17*), the White House issued NSAM 111, which spelled out the first phase of the stepped-up response in South Vietnam following the decisions made on the Taylor-Rostow recommendations (*see Nov. 11, 15*). The document closely followed the program sent on November 15 for Nolting to brief Diem. The number-one agenda item focused on aerial support: "Provide increased air lift to the GVN forces, including helicopters, light aviation, and transport aircraft, manned to the extent necessary by United States uniformed personnel and under United States operational control." The memorandum stopped short of authorizing combat troops, but it did call for boosting advisors with the South Vietnamese army, navy, and air force and for more equipment for each service. The White House also increased economic aid under the cover of flood relief, which the NSAM indicated could also be used for paying security forces and for an expanded counterinsurgency program.<sup>58</sup>

Several deployments were already well underway by the time NSAM 111 gave them formal authority. In fact, two USA helicopter companies sailed for South Vietnam on this same date, and McNamara sent a third one on the 27th (*see Oct. 25, Nov. 17, Dec. 25*). The secretary had authorized deployment of USAF C–123s for airlift purposes on November 13, the operation that evolved into Project Mule Train (*see Dec. 4, 11, 28*).<sup>59</sup>

**November 24**: In response to the Defense Department's question about potential international response to an aerial spraying program (*see Nov. 21*), Secretary Rusk wrote that "the use of defoliant does not violate any rule of international law concerning the conduct of chemical warfare and is an accepted tactic of war." He cited as precedent British spraying of crops in Malaya. Rusk conceded that the communists might attempt to label U.S. efforts as "germ warfare," but he believed that "plant-killing operations in Vietnam, carefully coordinated with and incidental to larger operations, can be of substantial assistance in the control and defeat of the Viet Cong." An attached State Department memorandum stressed that State and Defense agreed that all involved parties should "stay away from the term 'chemical warfare'" and "rather talk about 'weed killers."<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 20-21.

<sup>58.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:419–21.

<sup>59.</sup> Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 45. Another helicopter company sailed on December 15, reaching Da Nang on January 25.

<sup>60.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:663-64 (quotes); Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 21.

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**November 25**: William Bundy, the acting assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, wrote in a memorandum for Secretary McNamara that General McGarr had "sent two messages by special channels reporting disappointment by Diem that no decision has been made on Ed's coming back." The reference was to General Lansdale, whose return Diem had requested during the Taylor-Rostow mission (*see Oct. 18–24*). Although Taylor had included a passing reference to the idea in his report (*see Nov. 3*), with Taylor and the State Department no fans of Lansdale, the concept had gained no traction in Washington until Diem revisited it. In fact, immediately after Lansdale had returned from Asia, John and Robert Kennedy had tasked him with another assignment, reviewing and revising covert efforts against Cuba.<sup>61</sup>

The cables from McGarr revived the concept. Bundy added in the memo to McNamara that despite "the importance of Ed's assignment [on the Cuba project], I think he belongs in Vietnam, where he is of unique value." Rostow felt the same way, recalling later that "if there was any chance" to get Diem to undertake the needed reforms, "Ed could do it." He said Lansdale "dealt with people in developing countries in ways that made them feel dignified," unlike the typical U.S. envoy who would "come marching in and say, 'Mr. President, this is what you've got to do."<sup>62</sup>

Although the State Department had consistently opposed Lansdale's involvement in Vietnam (*see Jan. 2–14, 28, Apr. 20, Oct. 11*), in this case, Secretary Rusk spoke of "getting Lansdale out [to Vietnam] right away." Rusk did not see Lansdale as a replacement for Ambassador Nolting, but the secretary conceded to Taylor on November 27 that State had considered recalling Nolting "if we did not see a better response from Diem." Taylor had been cool to Lansdale's presence on the review team and remained so to the idea of Lansdale as a special envoy, which Nolting apparently also opposed. Although Lansdale had lobbied for U.S. advisors for the South Vietnamese government, he wrote to an old colleague on the 28th that the type of assignment being discussed for him was "duty without honor and I'd be damned if I'd do that." Nevertheless, he thought it "pure hell to be on the sidelines and seeing so conventional and unimaginative an approach being tried."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:422 (quote); FRUS 1961–63, 1:492; Lansdale interview (1970), 120; Currey, Lansdale, 239. Bundy indicated in his memo that McGarr favored Lansdale being sent to Saigon.

<sup>62.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:422 (1st quote); Walt W. Rostow, interview with Ted Gittinger, January 9, 1981, transcript, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 32 (2d–5th quotes), http://www.lbjlibrary. net/assets/documents/archives/oral\_histories/rostow/rostow%20web.pdf (hereafter Rostow interview [Jan. 1981]). The first mention the *FRUS* editors found of the Lansdale-to-Vietnam scenario was in a brief November 23 memo, which indicated that the president was to discuss the concept with Secretary McNamara and General Lemnitzer. *FRUS* 1961–63, 1:687 n. 4.

<sup>63.</sup> *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:675–76, 687–89 (quotes). Lansdale's letter was to Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams, the retired former commander of the MAAG, who had been close to Diem. Lansdale noted that he was being asked whether Williams would be a potential alternative if Lansdale could not be sent.

President Kennedy kept asking whether Lansdale was the only man who could carry out such an intercessory mission with Diem. Rostow responded in a memo that Lansdale was indeed "a unique national asset in the Saigon setting," adding that "I cannot believe that anything he may be able to do in his present assignment could match his value in Southeast Asia." This December 6 note was the last document dealing with the subject, however. Rostow later wrote that "Kennedy did not overrule the bureaucracy in this matter." He elaborated in an interview, stating that "it was one of those orderly bureaucratic decisions which was a disaster, because if there was anyone who could have saved that government and provided a transition to the new generation, it was Ed Lansdale."<sup>64</sup>

General Milton, who had observed Lansdale in Vietnam with the Taylor-Rostow team, said in a 1982 interview that the administration "made a great mistake" in not reinserting Lansdale into the palace in Saigon, "with no official title," but as "a gray eminence" who was "sort of in the shadow of Diem, who was a conduit for U.S. instructions and policy." Milton thought the formal channels of the embassy and the MAAG failed to provide a vital "link that we should have had in that curious, Byzantine world of South Vietnam."<sup>65</sup>

Lansdale remained involved with efforts against Cuba, which evolved into Operation Mongoose.  $^{66}$ 

**November 26**: The White House announced significant reorganization in administration staffing. The president named Ambassador Averell Harriman as the new assistant secretary of state for the Far East, with Harriman still the lead for the United States on the Laotian peace process. Rostow moved in early December from national security deputy to become director of policy planning at the State Department. McGeorge Bundy and Secretary McNamara, neither of whom had spent much time working directly on Vietnam up to that point, both picked up larger portfolios in that sphere when Rostow left the White House.<sup>67</sup>

**November 27**: Secretary McNamara informed the Joint Chiefs that he had recommended approval of a defoliation mission in Vietnam that would be based on what Deputy Secretary Gilpatric had outlined in his memorandum (*see Nov. 21*). Although they were still awaiting President Kennedy's decision (*see Nov. 30*), McNamara told the services to proceed with planning. The scenario he anticipated was that the South Vietnamese

<sup>64.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:687–88, 719 (1st–2d quotes); Rostow, Diffusion of Power, 279 (3d quote); Rostow interview (Jan. 1981), 32 (4th quote); Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:143–44.

<sup>65.</sup> Milton interview, 110–11.

<sup>66.</sup> Currey, Lansdale, 239-40.

<sup>67.</sup> Kaiser, American Tragedy, 118–20; Preston, War Council, 101; Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 321–22.

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would spray crops from helicopters while USAF aircraft and crews flew jungle defoliation missions. If the president did not approve overt USAF participation, the planes would be detailed with VNAF markings and assigned a VNAF "aircraft commander." Either way, the secretary wanted no publicity for the defoliation operations.<sup>68</sup>

On the same date, the Joint Chiefs requested Admiral Felt's opinion on whether the Jungle Jim detachment should participate in combat missions. According to the CINCPAC Command History, Felt "fully concurred" that the 4400th CCTS should be able to take part in such operations, particularly in support of the VNAF.<sup>69</sup>

**November 28**: While their defoliation mission was still pending presidential approval (*see Nov. 30*), nineteen officers and fifty enlisted airmen left Pope Air Force Base with six spray-equipped C–123s and additional C–124s for transport for multi-stop transit to South Vietnam (*see Dec. 6, 28*).<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile, administration concern with infiltration through Laos into South Vietnam continued, as Rostow wrote Secretary Rusk that the flow of North Vietnamese was "capable of prolonging the war for a long time." Rostow proposed that the United States counter with a political-military "scenario" that would "impose on North Vietnam limited appropriate damage, by air and sea action, if infiltration does not cease," advocating consideration of the plans he had already had Admiral Felt draw up (*see Oct. 16, Nov. 2*).<sup>71</sup>

**November 30**: The White House issued NSAM 115, which stated that President Kennedy had approved the recommendation "to participate in a selective and carefully controlled joint program of defoliant operations in Viet Nam starting with the clearance of key routes and proceeding thereafter to food denial only if the most careful basis of resettlement and alternative food supply has been created" (*see Nov. 21, 24*). Other than the vague reference to a "joint program," the document gave no guidance on how the operation that became known as Ranch Hand should be executed.<sup>72</sup>

Also on the 30th, Ambassador Galbraith recorded in his journal that he had requested permission from the State Department to meet with a senior North Vietnamese official who was scheduled to visit New Delhi. "The Department predictably said no," Galbraith wrote, "noting that it might hurt Diem's feelings."<sup>73</sup>

<sup>68.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 26.

<sup>69.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:188.

<sup>70.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 24-25.

<sup>71.</sup> Rust, So Much to Lose, 7.

<sup>72.</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 11:425 (quotes); Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 21-22.

<sup>73.</sup> Galbraith, Ambassador's Journal, 235.



At Bien Hoa in December 1961, Col. Ben King (*left*), Jungle Jim commander, reviews a mission plan with Col. Claude G. McKinney Jr. of 2d ADVON, who supervised the administrative and support side of Farm Gate. *USAF*.

**Early December**: While higher-level officials debated whether Jungle Jim should fly combat missions, and how to justify them to the international community if so (*see Nov. 27, Dec. 4, 6, 10, 15, 21, 26*), the 4400th CCTS began making strikes against NLF targets. Jungle Jim crews flew these sorties with 2d ADVON awareness of them, but with the 4400th in full operational control (*see Nov. 15*). The 2d ADVON often supplied intelligence for the missions, which it had received from the VNAF or ARVN, as the MAAG had no intelligence section. General Anthis insisted that 2d ADVON get concurrence for the missions from the ARVN, a stipulation that sometimes rendered the intelligence two or three days old before Jungle Jim could act on it. The VNAF squadron at Bien Hoa, which flew within minutes of receiving intelligence, "laughed at us" because of the approval delays, according to Colonel King.<sup>74</sup>

The first mission Jungle Jim flew was a night flare-ship strike on an NLF supply base on a small island in the Mekong delta. The 4400th had

<sup>74.</sup> King interview, 50–58, 83–84 (quote). The VNAF also operated under no established rules of engagement, other than to avoid overflying national boundaries, until April 1962. "Evolution of the Rules of Engagement for Southeast Asia," 6.



Gen. Emmett E. "Rosie" O'Donnell Jr. (*left*) visiting Saigon in 1963. While O'Donnell was on an inspection tour in Vietnam in December 1961, he met with President Diem, who told him that he was counting on increased air operations to support the ARVN. O'Donnell also received a briefing on the Farm Gate mission, with Colonel King seeking clarification from him on the VNAF training requirement. *USAF*.

practiced night attacks at Bien Hoa with flares King and his armament officer, Capt. John L. "Pete" Piotrowski (future USAF vice chief of staff), had procured from the Vietnamese navy. According to King, Jungle Jim flew about a dozen missions before it was under the requirement that its aircraft carry a Vietnamese national in each plane under the guise of training them (*see Dec. 4, 26*).<sup>75</sup>

During the same period, the 4400th was also flying direct airlift support missions at the request of the CIA, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the air attaché at the U.S. embassy. The 2d ADVON was unaware of these sorties, which, according to King, "raised General Anthis's hackles" when he found out about them. King had direct orders from General LeMay to support the CIA (*see Nov. 14*), an obligation that Anthis would not acknowledge and that King had been ordered not to discuss. King also said that Anthis was not cleared to be told of some of the covert operations, and that the 4400th could not share intelligence it received from embassy personnel with Anthis.<sup>76</sup>

75. King interview, 50–58, 80.

76. Ibid., 58-60, 80 (quote, 58).

**December 1**: General Lansdale wrote Secretary McNamara and Deputy Secretary Gilpatric of his concern about potential adverse publicity from a defoliation operation in Vietnam. The Defense Department plan at that time was to have Diem announce that he and his government had asked the United States to undertake a spraying program. Lansdale thought there would be a negative reaction from the international community and from the U.S. media unless a more detailed case were made for the operation. Eugene Zuckert, the secretary of the Air Force, echoed Lansdale's concerns in a note to McNamara on December 4.<sup>77</sup>

**December 3**: Ambassador Nolting recommended that defoliation missions in Vietnam be flown by aircraft with civilian markings with crews dressed as civilians. He also said that the chemicals should be shipped as civilian cargo consigned to the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) so they would not be subject to inspection by the ICC. According to Nolting, USOM, the MAAG, and the embassy were all in agreement that the operation should be disguised as a civilian mission. The USAF objected to Nolting's recommendations (*see Dec. 12*).<sup>78</sup>

**December 4**: After more than two weeks of negotiations and Vietnamese public recriminations (*see Nov. 17*), Diem agreed to a memorandum of understanding with the United States that formalized the expanded U.S. role in Vietnam (*see Nov. 15, 17, 22*). Most substantively, U.S. representatives backed down from most of the language that called for reforms in the South Vietnamese government. The final document also indicated that only "certain Americans, on a selective basis and on request," would work with the Diem administration.<sup>79</sup>

At the same time, with the USAF footprint in Southeast Asia growing, PACAF commander Gen. Emmett "Rosie" O'Donnell made an inspection tour in Vietnam. Over December 4–5, he met with MAAG, 2d ADVON, and Jungle Jim leadership and also with Diem. According to a memorandum from O'Donnell to Admiral Felt about the trip, the South Vietnamese president expressed to O'Donnell "his view that air operations must assume considerably increased importance during future intense operations he foresees." Diem was "counting on offensive air action to assume a major role in countering the continuing build-up of the Viet Cong." The prospective air operations would consist primarily of those anticipated from Farm Gate, as General Lansdale had briefed Diem on the

<sup>77.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 27-28.

<sup>78.</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>79.</sup> For the final document, see *FRUS 1961–63*, 1:713–16 (quote); for the efforts to gain Diem's agreement, see Shulimson, *JCS and Vietnam*, 1:142–46; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 123–24.

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offensive capabilities of the 4400th CCTS in October (*see Oct. 11*). Just as General Milton had observed during the Taylor-Rostow mission (*see Oct. 18–24*), O'Donnell and his staff found VNAF tactical control to be "crude and very, very modest," with limited ability to control even the VNAF missions, much less projected expansion with Farm Gate and Ranch Hand operations. As General Milton had, O'Donnell identified the establishment of an air operations center as a priority.<sup>80</sup>

The Jungle Jim detachment briefed O'Donnell on the combat missions it was already flying (*see Early Dec.*). Colonel King of the 4400th CCTS pointed out to O'Donnell that the United States would have trouble convincing the international community of the "training mission" cover story if a crash included only the "big bones" of U.S. personnel and no Vietnamese "small bones." King, who had been told that Farm Gate was supposed to have the veneer of training (*see Nov. 14*), had tried to engage the VNAF squadron at Bien Hoa but had received no cooperation. His comments jolted O'Donnell, who issued an order that Jungle Jim would fly combat missions "with at least one South Vietnamese national aboard any aircraft so committed." Admiral Felt concurred on the order, and the 4400th kept flying in combat, but debate on the details continued for three more weeks (*see Dec. 6, 10, 15, 21, 26*).<sup>81</sup>

Also on December 4, Secretary McNamara and the Joint Chiefs approved the deployment of sixteen C–123s to Vietnam, subject to the concurrence of Secretary Rusk. On the 6th, the 346th Troop Carrier Squadron (Assault) received orders to deploy for 120 days TDY "to participate in a classified training mission." The operation became known as Project Mule Train (*see Dec. 11, 28*). With the C–123s already detailed, Admiral Felt on December 11 rejected an Army request to send a CV–2 Caribou company to Vietnam. As General Milton observed, "We were trying to show that the Air Force could do all the local logistics better than the Army could" (*see Aug. 23*).<sup>82</sup>

McNamara and the Joint Chiefs also set a target date of December 15 to begin chemical spraying operations in Vietnam. McNamara granted prior approval for defoliation of "key routes" but wanted to be informed when Admiral Felt submitted detailed operational plans to the Joint Chiefs. The

80. PACAF to CINCPAC, December 7, 1961 (quotes), AFHRA, Iris no. 01005101; Robert Trumbull, "U.S. War Dogs, in Vietnam Test, Flush Guerrillas in Hide-Outs," *New York Times*, December 6, 1961. Colonel King of the 4400th CCTS believed that the USAF component of the MAAG had, over the previous years, attempted to set the VNAF up with a better tactical control network, but that the Army-dominated MAAG had resisted what it saw as an attempt to expand USAF involvement and control. King interview, 70–73.

81. Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 40–41 (King quotes); Futrell, Advisory Years, 82 (O'Donnell order); CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:188.

82. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 45; Walter J. Boyne, "Mule Train," *Air Force Magazine*, February 2001, 72 (1st quote); Milton interview, 88 (2d quote).

planning and approval process ended up taking longer than all expected (*see Dec. 6, 16, 28*). Felt was not satisfied with the plans he received from MAAG on December 4, and Pacific Command sent a counterproposal to MAAG ten days later, right before intensive discussion of the subject at the Honolulu conference with McNamara (*see Dec. 16*).<sup>83</sup>

On the 4th as well, Fifth Air Force circulated Operations Plan 32-61 among its headquarters staff officers. The document outlined plans for air operations in Southeast Asia if they became necessary. The paper's focus was on countering large-scale intervention from North Vietnam and/or China. "If the scope of the localized war were to expand," the document addressed participation by Strategic Air Command and Tactical Air Command, in support of CINCPAC, but remaining under the direction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>84</sup>

In Vietnam on December 4, Maj. W. George Haworth, a senior flight surgeon with the USAF Medical Corps, arrived in Saigon. His orders were to set up the USAF medical program in Vietnam under 2d ADVON to support the increasing number of airmen deployed there. Initially, Haworth had no staff and was assigned to the American Dispensary in downtown Saigon, which was an Army-controlled facility under the auspices of the MAAG. It took Haworth until April 1962 to get any USAF personnel sent, and in May, he set up a tent-based tactical dispensary at Tan Son Nhut airport.<sup>85</sup>

**December 6**: The Special Aerial Spray Flight detachment under command of Capt. Carl Marshall reached Clark Air Base (*see Nov. 9, 28*). The unit expected to fly on to Saigon but ended up in the Philippines for a month while awaiting orders, determination of whether the operations would be covert (*see Dec. 3, 14*), and shipment of chemicals (*see Dec. 15*). One cargo of defoliants had already reached Saigon, but by the time the administration made its decision to authorize the program, the rice crop in South Vietnam had matured and been harvested. Captain Marshall used the time at Clark to have his pilots practice spraying patterns, without chemicals, over the Philippine countryside. Staff from the unit made inspection trips to Saigon to prepare for the deployment.<sup>86</sup>

General Milton later noted that Thirteenth Air Force had very little to do with the project. He thought it "always seemed a little weird, this business of knocking all of the leaves off the trees so that you could see the enemy."<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 29; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:191.

<sup>84.</sup> O'Neill, "Fifth Air Force in the Southeast Asia Crisis (A Sequel)," 5–13 (quote, 7).

<sup>85.</sup> Wallace George Haworth, interview with Maj. Thomas J. Hickman, November 19, 1962, "Southeast Asia Studies and Interviews by Joseph W. Grainger and Others, 1962–1964," Project Checo Southeast Asia Report, Appendix 2C, AFHRA, Iris no. 01120059, pp. 1–4.

<sup>86.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 25-26, 29.

<sup>87.</sup> Milton interview, 87-88.



Fairchild C-123 Providers had been programmed to be removed from the USAF inventory in November 1961. Exigencies of Vietnam, plus the Air Force's need for an aircraft to compete with the Army's CV-2 Caribou, saved the C-123. By December, two units of them were on their way to Vietnam—those of the Special Aerial Spray Flight for Operation Ranch Hand (shown here in 1962), and those of the 346th Troop Carrier Squadron for Project Mule Train. USAF.

Also on the 6th, the Joint Chiefs formally approved Farm Gate aircraft to fly combat missions provided that a Vietnamese national was on board each plane for training purposes (*see Early Dec., Dec. 4, 10, 15, 21, 26*). Secretary McNamara had also authorized this arrangement.<sup>88</sup>

**December 6–22**: The Farm Gate detachment flew reconnaissance along Vietnamese coastal waters. Crews from the 4400th CCTS flew thirty-seven sorties to count the junk and sampan traffic but had no way to tell friend from foe. Two minesweepers from the U.S. Seventh Fleet also participated in this surveillance effort, as did junks crewed by South Vietnamese Civil Guard members.<sup>89</sup>

**December 8**: The U.S. State Department published William Jorden's white paper (*see Sept. 27*), *A Threat to Peace: North Viet-Nam's Effort to Conquer South Viet-Nam*, in which the United States publicly presented its

<sup>88.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 82-83.

<sup>89.</sup> Ibid., 82; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:180. The 4400th flew similar missions on February 5–7, 1962, again producing little useful intelligence.

brief for aid to South Vietnam far beyond what was allowed by the 1954 Geneva accords. The U.S. government argued that the North Vietnamese had already compromised the agreement with their support for the NLF/ PLAF. According to historian Howard Jones, Diem's takeaway from the white paper was that since the United States was recognizing the external threat as the biggest problem South Vietnam faced, "domestic reforms were secondary to stopping infiltration. He became convinced that the United States regarded South Vietnam as so integral to the Free World's fight against communism that the Kennedy administration had no choice but to help his government."<sup>90</sup>

**December 10**: Thirteenth Air Force submitted a draft plan for Farm Gate operations that distinguished between combat actions in support of the ARVN and training and advisory missions. While the plan was in line with General LeMay's concept for the Jungle Jim outfit (*see Oct. 11, Nov. 14*), Ambassador Nolting immediately raised objections (*see Dec. 15*).<sup>91</sup>

**December 11**: Eight C–123s of 346th Troop Carrier Squadron (Assault), along with support personnel, left Pope Air Force Base for Clark Air Base for staging of Project Mule Train (*see Dec. 4, 28*).<sup>92</sup>

Also on the 11th, the first fifteen of thirty T–28Cs loaned to the VNAF arrived at Tan Son Nhut. Although the USN provided the aircraft, the USAF was responsible for supporting them, with the 4400th CCTS training VNAF pilots to fly them. The USA 8th Transportation Company (Light Helicopter) deployed to Tan Son Nhut on the same date, with the 57th Transportation Company (Light Helicopter) sent to Qui Nhon. They were to fly and train ARVN pilots on H–21Cs, which Lt. Gen. John J. Tolson III, USA, later described as "old and unsuited for this particular mission." The *New York Times* declared the arriving helicopters and 400 in-uniform U.S. Army personnel, who were on the same carrier, as "the first direct support by the United States for South Vietnam's war against Communist guerrilla forces." Rules of engagement initially limited the aircraft to firing only to defend themselves.<sup>93</sup>

90. Gibbons, U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 2:103; Howard Jones, Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 138–39 (quote). For the document itself, on which Jorden was uncredited, see A Threat to Peace: North Viet-Nam's Effort to Conquer South Viet-Nam, Department of State Publication 7308 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, December 1961). McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security advisor, was not impressed with the report, later stating that "it's not a very good paper." Bundy interview, 37.

91. Futrell, Advisory Years, 83.

92. Boyne, "Mule Train," 72.

93. Tolson, *Airmobility*, 3, 26 (1st quote), 28; Futrell Chron., 11; Jones, *Death of a Generation*, 139 (2d quote); "Evolution of the Rules of Engagement," 4, 7.

In discussing North Vietnam's reaction to the helicopters and Army personnel, historian Pierre Asselin wrote that "the introduction of this equipment and the forces to man it, plus the Taylor-Rostow mission, notably heightened the stakes in the Washington-Hanoi confrontation and moved the two governments closer to war." The North Vietnamese government saw the increased U.S. involvement as "the perils of rash action by revolutionary forces in the South. At the same time, it understood that it must prepare for war with the United States, and it must do so sooner rather than later." The developments also gave more impetus, and ultimately more influence, to the radical elements in the politburo, led by Le Duan. The Hanoi government pushed 5,000 North Vietnamese regulars southward by the end of the year and began formulating a five-year military plan.<sup>94</sup>

There had been a trickle of men moving into the south from 1959 onward, but despite Diem's insistence since early 1960 that North Vietnamese infiltration was driving the southern insurgency (*see Feb. 12, 1960; Apr. 5–6, 1960*), the 5,000 troops who went south in late 1961 in response to the American deployment were the first of any consequential numbers. Most were southern natives who had fled north in 1954–55 when the Viet Minh withdrew from below the 17th parallel. By the end of 1962, total infiltrators numbered just over 19,000 men. Up to 3,000 North Vietnamese regulars assigned to Military Transportation Group 559 facilitated movement along the barely developed Ho Chi Minh Trail and also by sea. The ARVN, which remained the only source of intelligence, undercounted this infiltration.<sup>95</sup>

**December 12**: In a memorandum for the Defense Department from the Office of the Undersecretary of the Air Force, the USAF took issue with Ambassador Nolting's insistence that defoliation missions in Vietnam be disguised as an ostensibly civilian operation (*see Dec. 3*). The paper stated that while the C–123s could be transferred to the VNAF or flown under some other cover, there would be no hiding that the specially equipped aircraft had come from the USAF. The memorandum also expressed concern for the USAF crews and their rights under international law if they were flying as civilians. The USAF arguments ultimately prevailed in the debate (*see Dec. 14*).<sup>96</sup>

96. Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 28.

<sup>94.</sup> Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 114 (quotes); Nguyen, Hanoi's War, 59; Victory in Vietnam, 81.

<sup>95.</sup> Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 59; *Victory in Vietnam*, 80; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 94– 95. Ambassador Nolting recalled that "I doubt that it [North Vietnamese infiltration] reached as high as 6,000 a year, but it may have." He thought the peak was around 500 men a month during his time in Vietnam, mid-1961 through mid-1963. Nolting interview (1971), 5. Retrospective U.S. estimates in Saigon were actually pretty close to the mark when they included "unconfirmed" numbers. These showed infiltration of 5,843 troops in 1961 and 12,675 for 1962 for a total of 18,518. Van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos*, 12.

**December 14**: Joint State-Defense Message #781 spelled out that "the identity of United States crews and aircraft participating in the spraying operations of the defoliation program [in Vietnam] will not be disguised." The statement ended weeks of internal speculation over whether the Ranch Hand missions would be covert (*see Nov. 27, Dec. 3, 12*).<sup>97</sup>

With the declaration that the United States would operate overtly, another significant issue remained: the U.S. position regarding the ICC and the Geneva accords, which would be violated by additional U.S. forces in Vietnam and by U.S.-flown missions (*see Dec. 3*). The Defense Department did not clarify its justification until January 4, 1962, a delay that pushed back Ranch Hand deployment into Vietnam until January 7.<sup>98</sup>

Also on the 14th, Farm Gate flew the first of what would total seven propaganda missions, which ended on February 11, 1962, after an aircraft crashed. The planes dropped leaflets and made aerial broadcasts to towns and villages in NLF-controlled areas that could not be reached by ground. These included Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku, Kontum, Polei Kleng, and Polei Krong. The sixty-second broadcasts required dangerously low passes at only 500–600 feet. Colonel King flew one of the first of these missions himself, with Lt. Col. Nguyen Cao Ky of the VNAF, the future prime minister, as his copilot.<sup>99</sup>

**December 15**: In response to operational planning for Farm Gate (*see Dec.* 10), Ambassador Nolting directed that no U.S.-involved combat missions take place in South Vietnam without his approval. Although Nolting, as overall head of the country team, had the right to assert such authority, the Pentagon included no such requirement in any guidance to the 4400th CCTS (*see Dec. 16, 21, 26*). The ambassador's insistence on involvement in military oversight gave impetus to the push for a higher-level military command in Vietnam (*see Nov. 13*). Nolting stated in a 1971 interview that Farm Gate "probably came closer to violating, in some cases, the noncombat role of American military people in Vietnam than any other branch, possibly any other activity, but the circumstances were such that you can see why it happened."<sup>100</sup>

Also on the 15th, a shipment of 160,000 gallons of defoliants for Ranch Hand left Oakland, California, on a commercial vessel, which arrived in Saigon on January 8. Another cargo of 48,000 gallons sailed

<sup>97.</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>98.</sup> Ibid., 28-29, 31.

<sup>99.</sup> Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 122; Ky, *Buddha's Child*, 66. Lt. Col. Butler Toland remembered Ky as "a pretty gung ho type" but said he "never had real solid confidence" in him, thought he "would tell you one thing and maybe do another." He did think that Ky was a "good pilot." Toland interview, 51–52.

<sup>100.</sup> Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 83; Nolting interview (1971), 48 (quote). As Farm Gate evolved beyond 1961, a system emerged that required Nolting and the MACV commander to be notified of operations during which bombs larger than 250 pounds would be used. Nolting interview (1971), 48.



Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara talking with Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Adm. Harry D. Felt, the CINCPAC, in an undated photo from 1961–62. From December 1961 onward, after McNamara became directly involved in Vietnam planning, he traveled there or to Honolulu for meetings with senior military and civilian leaders on a regular basis. *USN*.

in late December. The Defense Department paid \$2.5 million for these chemicals, about \$11 per gallon.<sup>101</sup>

**December 15–31**: A delegation of senior Chinese military officials visited Hanoi, again urging the North Vietnamese to exercise caution. Extreme economic problems in China left its leaders with few resources to spare and no interest in engaging the United States directly.<sup>102</sup>

**December 16**: Secretary McNamara held a high-level, nine-hour conference at Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu to discuss the situation in Vietnam. Those in attendance included Generals Lemnitzer and McGarr, Admiral Felt, and Ambassador Nolting. Records indicate that the first meeting was a smaller, "restricted" one that likely did not include USAF representation. General O'Donnell, the PACAF commander, was

<sup>101.</sup> Buckingham, *Operation Ranch Hand*, 29–30. The overall cost would equal more than \$21 million in 2020 dollars, just over \$100 per gallon.

<sup>102.</sup> Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 114-15; Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 113.

at the expanded session later in the day. McNamara impressed O'Donnell with his forceful assertion that the United States was fully committed to defending South Vietnam. According to a CINCPAC report, McNamara said that South Vietnam "had the highest priority, and the U.S. was prepared to provide everything except combat troops."<sup>103</sup>

The conference included what one memorandum described as "considerable discussion on [the] use of Jungle Jim." The document recorded that "General Lemnitzer cleared up all doubts by saying that they could [be] use[d] for [as] many missions [as] they wished in South Vietnam by putting one Vietnamese aboard." McNamara reiterated approval for combat operations with a Vietnamese backseat passenger, with the stipulation that the flights be limited to South Vietnam. Another document recorded that McNamara thought that the Jungle Jim capabilities should be "exploited on all types of missions to include dropping bombs and firing." Despite these pronouncements by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the secretary of defense, however, the issue was not settled until Taylor and McGeorge Bundy arranged tacit presidential approval (*see Dec. 21*).<sup>104</sup>

At the same meeting, McNamara stated the Defense Department preference that defoliation operations begin with clearing foliage along key roads in NLF-infested areas. Chemical spraying presented a "ticklish" problem internationally, according to McNamara, and the thinking was that an initial focus on roadways would be less controversial than crop destruction. McGarr informed McNamara that a joint MAAG-ARVN team was in the process of selecting routes to target and intended to have a list finalized by December 20. The MAAG did not yet have an operational plan, but one was being "aggressively pursued," McGarr said (*see Dec. 28*). An aide at the conference noted in a recap for a colleague that McNamara "clearly had little faith in gimmicks such as defoliants."<sup>105</sup>

The senior leaders at the Honolulu conference also emphasized that the Mule Train C–123s were deploying for "combat support activities," not for "taxi service."<sup>106</sup>

In response to another topic that arose at the meetings, Nolting began pressing South Vietnamese officials to include VNAF and Vietnamese navy representatives on their Joint General Staff to improve operational coordination. At the time, the ARVN completely dominated the senior South Vietnamese military leadership (*see May*).<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:739–41; Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:166–68; Futrell, Advisory Years, 119; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:191 (quote).

<sup>104.</sup> FRUS 1961–63, 1:741 (1st–2d quotes); Shulimson, JCS and Vietnam, 1:167 (3d quote); Futrell, Advisory Years, 83.

<sup>105.</sup> Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 30 (1st-2d quotes); FRUS 1961-63, 1:742 (3d quote), 749.

<sup>106.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:744.

<sup>107.</sup> Ibid., 1:751.

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**December 20**: Nguyen Dinh Thuan, the South Vietnamese secretary of state, told Ambassador Nolting that South Vietnamese intelligence had concluded that the PLAF was forming in larger units, up to division strength. The ARVN expected "major VC attacks to be mounted within a couple of months," according to Nolting, who reported to Washington that "this analysis, if correct, makes it all the more necessary that our forces move promptly to the offensive to disrupt and destroy VC ability to concentrate."<sup>108</sup>

**December 21**: In a cable updating President Kennedy on the status of Vietnam-related initiatives, Taylor informed the president that Jungle Jim "combat missions" with combined USAF-VNAF crews "as part of combat crew training requirements" would begin "soon." The aircraft would have VNAF markings.<sup>109</sup>

This two-sentence mention of Jungle Jim was part of a curious effort to notify Kennedy of the start of operations without having the president actually have to authorize them. The embassy in Saigon had been told to delay missions until December 22, after Kennedy had received this message. (Farm Gate histories and interviews make no mention of such a moratorium actually being observed.) McGeorge Bundy was aware of the arrangement. According to a message Taylor had received from one of his military aides, "If there is no reaction from the White House, Saigon will be given an affirmative answer."<sup>110</sup>

On the same date, the overall commander of the 4400th CCTS, Colonel King, returned stateside, leaving Lt. Col. Robert Gleason in charge of the detachment at Bien Hoa. King recalled that while he was back at Hurlburt Field, the TAC commander, Gen. Walter C. Sweeney Jr., "never asked me anything" about the covert side of the Jungle Jim operation. "He recognized that we were subject to responding to agencies other than the United States Air Force." According to Gleason, after the 4400th had been in Vietnam for about a year, Sweeney did order that Jungle Jim troops wear USAF insignia, a directive Gleason cleared with General LeMay before implementing.<sup>111</sup>

**December 23**: Since Diem and the ARVN had done very little to develop a viable counterinsurgency effort, Secretary McNamara had asked at the Honolulu conference (*see Dec. 16*) that General McGarr try to convince Diem to undertake a smaller operation that had a good chance for success.

<sup>108.</sup> Ibid., 1:752.

<sup>109.</sup> Ibid., 1:754.

<sup>110.</sup> Ibid., 1:754 n. 3. See also the introduction of this book.

<sup>111.</sup> Kissling, Air Commando and Special Operations Chronology, 6; King interview, 33 (quote); Gleason, Air Commando Chronicles, 27.



Lt. Col. Robert L. Gleason was the operations officer for the 4400th CCTS (Jungle Jim) from the time of its activation in April 1961 and assumed command of the Farm Gate detachment in Vietnam when Colonel Ben King returned stateside on December 21. Gleason remained in that post through spring 1962. USAF.

On this date, Pacific Command sent forward for approval by the Joint Chiefs a phased-action plan for clearing the NLF from a single province, Binh Duong, which was just north of the Saigon area.<sup>112</sup>

In the same time frame, McGarr tried to sell Diem on the larger-scale Pacific Command concept of the Vietnam Win Plan (*see Oct. 16*). The CINCPAC Command History recorded that Diem "showed little enthusiasm when the plan was presented to him, apparently because of his reluctance to delegate authority and control of forces to his commanders."<sup>113</sup>

**December 25**: The first U.S. Army H–21 helicopter company became operational in Vietnam, with a second coming online on January 5, 1962 (*see Oct. 25, Nov. 22, Dec. 11*).<sup>114</sup>

<sup>112.</sup> CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:172. 113. Ibid., 1:171.

<sup>114.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:754.



An aerial view of Bien Hoa in December 1961 shows the Farm Gate T-28s and two C-47s plus much of what then existed at the facility in terms of hangars, barracks, and support buildings. The tents housing Jungle Jim personnel are possibly those behind the two-story buildings and water tower, left-center of the frame. USAF.

**December 26**: Two Jungle Jim T–28s escorted two VNAF AD–6s on a strike against an NLF encampment and rice fields about fifty miles north of Saigon. This attack was both one of the first combat missions the USAF flew in Vietnam with official authorization from the highest level (*see Dec. 21*)—although Jungle Jim had been flying operations for weeks (*see Early Dec.*)—and also the last overt mission the 4400th CCTS undertook before receiving new rules of engagement. On the same date, in the final clarification of the roles for Farm Gate, General Lemnitzer sent instructions to Admiral Felt and General McGarr that the 4400th could fly offensive operations only when the VNAF could not, and, as all had agreed, with a VNAF airman on board each aircraft.<sup>115</sup>

"This was a façade," General Anthis stated in a 1969 interview. "Everybody knew it." He added that "I don't think we were kidding anybody but ourselves on this," with "our image of being in there as advisors and so on, and trainers of the Vietnamese Air Force." Anthis said that "we were going in with the idea, initially, that we were going to be guerrillas ourselves, operate behind their lines, do things on a covert basis. And it certainly was not being done on a covert basis. We got right in on an overt basis at the beginning. We did put up the façade of carrying Vietnamese in the rear seat." With limited guidance or oversight, Anthis recalled that "unless somebody told us not to do it," referring generally

<sup>115.</sup> Futrell, Advisory Years, 83-84; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:188.

to operations, "and we thought it was the right thing to do, we did it." The missions were supposed to be limited to South Vietnam but at times "inadvertently" strayed into Cambodia.<sup>116</sup>

Colonel King added that the VNAF officers "didn't want" the training arrangement and thought it was "the most foolish thing they'd ever heard of." King believed that it was "a burden on them, it was a burden on us, and it was a farce that didn't fool anybody." The VNAF had a completely separate operation already established and had some highly experienced pilots, certainly more experienced than the Americans in the type of warfare underway in Vietnam.<sup>117</sup>

According to King, at least initially, training of VNAF crews "was a *complete* cover; we never made any effort whatsoever to train these people." He noted that VNAF personnel, including cooks, volunteered to be rear-seat passengers because they received an additional twelve cents a day for the duty, but "they were given *absolutely* no training. We showed them how to get in a parachute." No pilot orientation took place until the T–28s the United States had begun shipping for the VNAF (*see Dec. 11*) became operational in 1962, and none of those pilots flew missions with the 4400th.<sup>118</sup>

Even with the new requirements, Jungle Jim did not stop flying missions for the CIA and the U.S. embassy. These sorties did not have a Vietnamese national on board and were without 2d ADVON oversight (*see Nov. 14, Early Dec.*).<sup>119</sup>

Also on December 26, Spec. 4 George F. Fryett, USA, a clerk at MAAG headquarters, became the first U.S. serviceman taken prisoner by the NLF. Fryett was riding his bicycle to a swimming pool in an area on the outskirts of Saigon when two men blew him off his bike with a grenade. The NLF held him until June 1962, then put him on a bus for Saigon.<sup>120</sup>

119. King interview, 60.

120. Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1998), 60–61. Lieutenant Colonel Gleason describes a Jungle Jim air-ground search operation for a U.S. Army sergeant from the MAAG who had been taken prisoner by the NLF. He dates it in December 1961, with Colonel King leading the ground element. King returned stateside on December 21, five days before Fryett's capture, and Rochester and Kiley's research (p. 60) shows no other U.S. servicemen taken prisoner during that time frame. It is possible that the Jungle Jim search was for Fryett, after King had left. Gleason, *Air Commando Chronicles*, 32.

<sup>116.</sup> Anthis interview, 14-15, 23-24.

<sup>117.</sup> King interview, 61-63. For VNAF indignation at the arrangement, see Ky, Buddha's Child, 66.

<sup>118.</sup> King interview, 63–65. Malcolm W. Browne, who had arrived in Saigon in the fall of 1961 as Associated Press bureau chief, later recounted that "I'd heard stories that U.S. pilots were actually dropping bombs" and went out to Bien Hoa investigate. Barred from entering, he "watched from outside the perimeter fence and saw two-seat T–28s taking off with full racks of bombs. When they returned, I could see that their racks were empty and there were smoke stains behind the guns. As often as not, a Vietnamese was sitting in the back and the actual pilot was blond and blue-eyed and obviously not from Vietnam. By reporting that, I was threatened with expulsion. The official American line was that the U.S. role in Vietnam was subordinate to that of our Vietnamese ally." Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 704–5.

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December 27: Although President Kennedy had detailed General Lansdale to work on plans for covert operations against Cuba (see Nov. 3, 25), on this date Lansdale did send a memorandum to General Lemnitzer and Secretary McNamara concerning a Vietnam issue. Admiral Felt and Pacific Command had worked with the MAAG to develop a plan for an ARVN task force to conduct operations against heavy concentrations of PLAF insurgents. MAAG officers had briefed Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh, commander of ARVN Army Field Command, on the concept, and Big Minh, as he was known, took the plan to Diem. The South Vietnamese president "immediately became most suspicious and demanded to know why such task forces should operate directly under field command," according to General McGarr's report to Felt of Minh's account. Indeed, Diem and Nhu distrusted Minh so much that they bypassed the general and Field Command in actual operation of the armed forces (see Apr. 1961). Felt told McGarr to enlist Ambassador Nolting's help in selling Diem on the idea and also cabled Lemnitzer to have the State Department direct Nolting's cooperation.<sup>121</sup>

In his advice for Lemnitzer, Lansdale bluntly stated that "Diem is apprehensive of a coup." He wrote that "in CINCPAC's proposal, as in other comments on this problem, I have yet to note anyone come up with an answer to Diem's apprehension." Lansdale explained that "we know that Big Minh has been outspoken about a coup. Diem certainly knows about the way Big Minh has been talking, also. Now we ask Diem to give practical control of his military force to a man who has talked about a coup. What realistic assurances can we give Diem that the action he fears won't take place?" While Lansdale was clear in his analysis of the problem, he was vague in the solution he offered: "It would seem that the increased U.S. military stake in Vietnam should afford some means for stabilizing the political relationships within the Vietnamese Armed Forces long enough for all concerned to get on with the war." If this rapprochement could be achieved, "Nolting and McGarr should have little trouble in getting Diem to play ball."<sup>122</sup>

**December 28**: Admiral Felt forwarded the operations plan for Ranch Hand to the Joint Chiefs, who approved it on January 2, 1962. It called for defoliating 200 meters on both sides of roadways that totaled 300 miles,

<sup>121.</sup> FRUS 1961-63, 1:753 (quote), 755-60.

<sup>122.</sup> Ibid., 1:764 (quotes). Diem never did follow through on the recommended task force concept. In November 1962, he abolished Minh's Field Command and gave him the largely honorific title of military advisor to the president. A year later, Minh was one of the leaders of the coup that overthrew Diem, and Minh became head of the initial ruling military junta. Cosmas, *MACV*, 82–83, 104; Don, *Our Endless War*, 83. General Don, who collaborated with Minh in the coup, wrote (p. 78) that in the early 1960s, Minh was "very outspoken in his criticism, even to foreigners, so it is a little strange that he survived as well as he did. His overall popularity in the country saved him, I suppose."

most within areas of heavy NLF concentration. The operation was to be based at Tan Son Nhut, using USAF aircraft crewed by USAF airmen. VNAF personnel would aid in targeting. On the 3d, President Kennedy authorized the plan, but only a limited, experimental trial of it. Orders for deployment to Vietnam reached the Special Aerial Spray Flight at Clark Air Base on January 7 (*see Dec. 6*).<sup>123</sup>

Also on December 28, officers from 315th Air Division under Col. Lopez J. Mantoux deployed to Tan Son Nhut to oversee Project Mule Train (*see Dec. 4, 11*). The C–123s arrived on January 2, and the unit became the airlift branch of the VNAF/2d ADVON joint operations center, with responsibility for managing C–123 mission activity. The aircraft began operations on January 3.<sup>124</sup>

**December 29**: General LeMay entered the hospital at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, after two weeks of ill health. Doctors determined that he had suffered a heart attack and kept him hospitalized until February 12. The USAF completed the mobilization of several detachments to Vietnam during this period.<sup>125</sup>

**December 31**: The MAAG notified Admiral Felt that Diem's government had approved the deployment of a USAF tactical air control system (*see Dec. 4*).<sup>126</sup>

The year ended with 838 USAF personnel in Southeast Asia, with more on the way with the standing up of Ranch Hand and Mule Train. The widely repeated number of U.S. military personnel in Vietnam at that time is 3,205, although MAAG had an authorized strength of more than 4,000, and hundreds of men were in transit.<sup>127</sup>

At this time, Pacific Command estimated that South Vietnam had a force strength of 291,300, with 162,700 in the ARVN, 63,200 in the Civil Guard, 53,100 in the Self-Defense Corps, 5,300 in the VNAF, 3,900 in the navy, and 3,100 in the marines. Despite the stated strength of the VNAF, it had only 225 qualified pilots.<sup>128</sup>

123. Buckingham, Operation Ranch Hand, 30-31; FRUS 1961-63, 1:767-68.

124. Boyne, "Mule Train," 72-73.

125. Thomas M. Coffey, Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay (New York: Crown, 1986), 373.

126. CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:195.

127. Futrell, Advisory Years, 127; David L. Anderson, The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 286; CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:175.

128. CINCPAC Command History 1961, 1:177-78; Ky, Buddha's Child, 63.



President Kennedy reads a proclamation during the ceremony swearing in General LeMay as USAF chief of staff, June 30, 1961. LeMay said in a later interview that "the administration spouted new phrases and things of that sort, but as far as the Air Force was concerned, we had no radical change in thinking at all." This intransigence often put LeMay in conflict with people like Secretary McNamara and Maxwell Taylor. *Kennedy Library.* 

# Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
CCTS	Combat Crew Training Squadron
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COIN	counterinsurgency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command
CRC	control and reporting center
D	Democrat
DefCon	Defense Readiness Condition
Det	detachment
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
HIDAL	Helicopter Insecticide Dispersal Apparatus, Liquid
ICC	International Control Commission
JATO	Jet-Assisted Takeoff

JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAP	Military Assistance Program
MDAP	Mutual Defense Assistance Program
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
NLF	National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
OET	Operations, Evaluations, and Training Group
OPLAN	Operation Plan
PACAF	Pacific Air Forces (USAF)
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
РЕО	Programs Evaluation Office
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
POW	Prisoner of War
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSP	perforated steel planking (Marston Mat)

R	Republican
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
SAC	Strategic Air Command (USAF)
SASF	Special Aerial Spray Flight (USAF)
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
STOL	short takeoff and landing
TAC	Tactical Air Command (USAF)
TDY	temporary duty
TERM	Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission
UN	United Nations
UPI	United Press International
USA	U.S. Army
USAF	U.S. Air Force
USMC	U.S. Marine Corps
USN	U.S. Navy
USOM	U.S. Operations Mission
VC	Viet Cong
VNAF	Republic of Vietnam Air Force (South Vietnam)

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# VIETNAM FIFTIETH COMMEMORATION



U.S. AIR FORCE

