1965: The Decision to Escalate the Vietnam War

Background Information for the Exercise

In the summer of 1965, President Lyndon Johnson and senior U.S. decision makers faced crucial decisions concerning Vietnam. June and July saw a series of meetings in Washington and Saigon that attempted to develop a strategy for dealing with the worsening situation in South Vietnam and for assessing both U.S. military activities in the South and the bombing campaign over the North. The discussion in this exercise will simulate a decision-making meeting of that time, using available documents from the period as references.

For the simulation discussion, assume that the time is July of 1965 and that you are a member of the National Security Council staff. In preparation for this seminar, read the general background of events that follows in this paper and review the set of ten reference documents that will accompany this file. (Titled: Escalating the War in Vietnam Reference Documents). Notice that the General Background reading and the reference documents take you only to July 1965, so all that happens later can be only speculation. You must deal with the issues, the intelligence assessments, and the possible courses of action based only on what was known then, just as those involved did.

The decisions made in 1965 would have involved the senior civilian and military leadership, including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Chairman of the JCS General Earle Wheeler, Army Chief of Staff General Harold Johnson, Air Force Chief of Staff General John McConnell, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral David McDonald, Commandant of the Marine Corps General Wallace Greene, and CIA Director Vice Admiral William Raborn, Under Secretary of State George Ball, and Asst. Secretary of Defense John McNaughton. There is no evidence that a meeting of the President with these eleven officials took place (the chiefs themselves seldom met with the President), but all were heavily involved in the discussions and in a number of meetings during the period.

As part of the seminar discussion, you may be asked to play the role of one of the principals, to defend a particular position, or to challenge the wisdom of a course of action. All of you will be asked to give your own judgments in terms of advice to the President on some key issues identified at the end of this reading.

Remember: the time is July 1965.
General Background

*Tonkin Gulf and Beyond.* In July 1965, nearly a year after the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the situation in South Vietnam has continued to deteriorate despite the build-up of U.S. advisors to the South Vietnamese military and the commencement of bombing of the North. Instead, more territory has been lost to the Viet Cong insurgents, and a series of government changes have further destabilized the South Vietnamese regime.

Since August 1964, U.S. force levels in Vietnam have risen from 16,000 to 71,000, and planning is under way for further increases, as well as for assigning combat roles to the U.S. ground forces, which up to the present have had advisory roles to the Republic of South Vietnam Armed Forces. In 1964, the United States lost 147 killed in action (or from other causes), with another 1,000 wounded or captured. Sixty aircraft, fixed wing and helicopters, were lost in combat.

Similar casualty rates have continued in 1965, but with increased troop levels and expanding bombing operations, casualty rates are sure to increase. Moreover, if the U.S. forces assume a full combat role in South Vietnam, large increases in forces will be required, with consequent increases in losses. Before undertaking such an expansion of the U.S. role in the war, the U.S. government intends to conduct a full exploration of its options.

Following the reprisal air raids on targets in North Vietnam that took place subsequent to the attacks on the U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, little other U.S. offensive action took place for the remainder of 1964. Instead, U.S. actions focused on stabilizing the South Vietnamese government. Throughout the fall of 1964, the Saigon government went through several reorganizations and cabinet reshuffles, instituted a new constitution, and endured at least two coup attempts. These actions took place in the midst of student riots and Buddhist demonstrations. With the government turmoil and the slackening of morale in the Vietnamese officer corps, the Viet Cong increased their presence and influence throughout the country.

In these circumstances, U.S. officials were reluctant to undertake further actions for fear of further destabilizing the government, though several U.S. officials recommended actions to help stiffen the Saigon government resolve. Even when, on 1 November 1964, a mortar attack on Bien Hoa Air Base killed five U.S. servicemen, wounded seventy-six, and destroyed six B-57 aircraft, the United States did not retaliate. That these events took place within two days of the U.S. presidential elections also influenced the U.S. response, or rather the lack of one.
The Escalation Process

Events in early 1965 brought the United States into more direct confrontation with North Vietnam and increased the combat role of U.S. forces in the South. Secretary of Defense McNamara and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy concluded that increased U.S. commitment would itself stabilize the South Vietnamese government, and that U.S. air attacks would provide the needed morale boost. While Bundy was in Saigon on 7 February 1965 for discussions with General Nguyen Khanh, who had taken over the government two weeks earlier in a bloodless coup, the Viet Cong attacked a military base in Pleiku. In the attack, eight U.S. servicemen were killed, 126 wounded, and ten U.S. aircraft destroyed. Coming at a time when Bundy was in Saigon and Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin was visiting Hanoi, the attack was interpreted as a deliberate challenge to the United States (and assumed done with Soviet acquiescence).

The U.S. response began a day later when aircraft from two U.S. aircraft carriers attacked a barracks and staging area at a suspected guerilla training camp in North Vietnam. Subsequent raids took place on the days following against similar targets. These retaliatory raids then expanded into the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign. By April 1965, Rolling Thunder grew to 3,600 Air Force and Navy sorties a month against targets such as fuel depots, bridges, factories, and power plants in North Vietnam.

Because some of the air strikes against the North were launched from bases within South Vietnam, the vulnerability of these bases to attack by the Viet Cong became an issue, particularly so for Da Nang Air Base, in the northern section of the country. Therefore, in March 1965, a Marine Expeditionary Brigade landed at Da Nang to protect the base. The Marines set up a perimeter around the base and on the high ground to the west. Through April and May, more Marines landed and deployed to the north and south of Da Nang, occupying Phu Bai, ten miles south of the city of Hue, and Chu Lai, fifty-five miles south of Da Nang. The Marine units, designated III Marine Amphibious Force, set up an enclave-defense around the three areas and began pacification programs. Soon, with airfields established, Marine aircraft began flying from all three locations (Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Chu Lai).

The Marine deployments initiated a larger build-up of forces that were recommended by Army Chief of Staff General Harold Johnson. General Johnson headed a team sent by President Johnson to Vietnam in March to study ways of increasing security in the country and providing a more active U.S. presence. Based on General Johnson’s recommendations, the Army’s 173rd Airborne Brigade deployed from Okinawa, Japan, to Bien Hoa and Vung Tau in the southern part of South Vietnam. Though the United States had not yet completely departed from the advisory status of its forces, with the deployment of these units U.S. forces received authorization to undertake proactive roles that
approached full combat employment (National Security Action Memorandum No. 328, 6 April 1965). The U.S. forces remained for the most part within their regional enclaves, but they soon began to engage more and more in direct combat with Viet Cong guerillas. Units from the Australian and New Zealand armies also deployed to South Vietnam as part of this build-up, and the United States began negotiations with the South Korean government for subsequent deployments of South Korean troops.

Taking direct action to combat Viet Cong guerillas, the United States began the employment of B-52 bombers on 17 June 1965. These aircraft, the backbone of Strategic Air Command’s bomber force, conducted bombing raids not against strategic targets in North Vietnam, but against Viet Cong strongholds in South Vietnam, concentrating in the suspected areas of Viet Cong locations to the northwest of Saigon.

Seeking to Negotiate

While the United States continued to increase its involvement in combat roles in South Vietnam, it also pursued several initiatives to reach an accommodation with the government of North Vietnam. On 7 April 1965, President Johnson made a major policy speech at Johns Hopkins University, broadcast nationwide, in which he called for a peaceful, cooperative solution in Vietnam and asked for “unconditional negotiations” with the North Vietnamese. Bombing raids over the North continued, however.

A month later, in an unpublicized move, the U.S. government initiated a one-week pause in the bombing while simultaneously the U.S. ambassador in Moscow delivered a note to Hanoi’s embassy there. The note announced a weeklong bombing pause and asked for a reciprocal reduction in North Vietnamese activity in the South as a sign of a willingness to negotiate. (A copy of the note was also given to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin in Washington.) The following day, President Johnson made a speech asking Hanoi to consider a “political solution.” The letter to the Hanoi embassy was returned to the U.S. embassy, apparently unopened; several days later Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko told U.S. secretary of State Dean Rusk that the announced bombing pause had been seen as “insulting.” Bombing resumed after the weeklong pause.

Reaching the July Decision Point

With no negotiations in prospect, the United States faced critical decisions concerning its commitment to South Vietnam. Intelligence assessments from Vietnam predicted a shift in strategy by the Viet Cong, supported by troops from the North, away from guerilla warfare to conventional, large-unit operations (employing regiment or larger-sized formations). Further pressure for a prompt decision on U.S. commitment came in June 1965, when, under pressure from popular demonstrations throughout the country,
the South Vietnamese government leadership resigned and was replaced by a ten-man National Leadership Committee under General Nguyen Van Thieu. General Thieu became president and General Nguyen Cao Ky became premier.

This new leadership was not only more “pro-American” than any of its predecessors, but it also pledged a full-scale mobilization of men into military service, a crackdown on corruption, and a program of national unity, all aimed at a full-scale campaign against the Viet Cong. Both Thieu and Ky asked for the introduction of large U.S. combat forces as part of this program.

It is in this political and military context that President Johnson has convened a meeting of U.S. senior leadership to examine the United States options. President Johnson has been meeting and speaking with key members of Congress and key officials from previous administrations (the Wise Men), and Secretary of Defense McNamara has just returned from a trip to Vietnam during which he conferred with Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and General William Westmoreland.

**Simulation Discussion**

As a point of departure for the discussion, assume the U.S. political objectives are as follows:

- Prevent communist domination of the region
- Establish a stable, self-sustaining, non-communist government in SVN
- Demonstrate U.S. capability to counter wars of national liberation
- Avoid humiliation and loss of reputation of the United States as a guarantor of freedom
- Avoid a war with China

As you evaluate the situation and possible options involving the **military strategy** in the region, develop judgments on the:

- Military objectives that will help to achieve the political objectives;
- Assumptions made (explicit or implicit) that you wish to question;
- Military means needed to accomplish the objectives;
- Other options for achieving the military objectives; and
- Strategic guidance that should be provided to the theater commander.
Identification of Principals and Others Mentioned in the Reference Documents
(Positions Occupied in July 1965)

United States Government

- McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor
- William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs
- Chester Cooper, Assistant for Asian Affairs on the NSC Staff
- General Andrew Goodpaster, Assistant to the Chairman, JCS
- General Wallace Greene, Commandant of the Marine Corps
- Hubert Humphrey, Vice President
- General Harold Johnson, Army Chief of Staff
- Lyndon Johnson, President
- Henry Cabot Lodge, Ambassador to South Vietnam, August 1963 to June 1964, and August 1965 to March 1967
- General John McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff; succeeded General Curtis LeMay in this position in February 1965.
- Admiral David McDonald, Chief of Naval Operations
- Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense
- John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs
- Admiral William Raborn, Director of Central Intelligence, succeeded John McCone in this position in April 1965.
- Walt Rostow, Director, State Department Policy Planning Staff
- Dean Rusk, Secretary of State
- Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Command
• General Earle Wheeler, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, succeeded General Maxwell Taylor in this position.

Republic of Vietnam (South)

• General Nguyen Khanh, assumed power in Saigon after a coup on 30 January 1964; de facto premier as part of a triumvirate from August 1964 to October 1964; assumed power as Chairman of the Armed Forces Council in a bloodless coup in January 1965 until February 1965.

• General Nguyen Cao Ky, one of three generals (along with Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Bao Tri) who assumed power in February 1965 after the dismissal of General Khanh. In June 1965, Ky became Premier.

• Phan Huy Quat, Premier from January until June 1965 when he resigns under pressure and is replaced by Nguyen Cao Ky.

• Phan Khac Suu, President from January until June 1965 when he resigns under pressure and is replaced by Nguyen Van Thieu.

• General Nguyen Van Thieu, one of three generals (along with Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Bao Tri) who assumed power in February 1965 after the dismissal of General Khanh. In June 1965, Thieu became President.

Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North)

• Pham Van Dong, Premier of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

• Ho Chi Minh, Leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.