

IV. DEBATE OVER MORE DEPLOYMENTS AND STRATEGY

General Westmoreland's request for a 40 percent increase in U. S. forces in South Vietnam created much consternation in the administration, the Congress, and the public. The war was already the subject of violent debate in the nation. Nevertheless, the President asked his new Secretary of Defense to chair an ad hoc, cabinet-level task force which would determine how General Westmoreland's needs could be met. The Air Force, the other services, and the Joint Chiefs were called upon to review or suggest alternate plans.

Three Air Force Strategies

As part of the review by Secretary Clifford's task force, Secretary Brown, Under Secretary Hoopes, and the Air Staff were jointly engaged in formulating three air strategies for prosecuting the war. On 4 March Dr. Brown and Mr. Hoopes prepared a summary report to which were appended three pages describing the proposed air campaigns. Two had been prepared by the Air Staff and one by an ad hoc Operations Analysis-Rand study group. While the task force was reviewing the papers, the Air Staff continued to refine details for the strategy in these studies.

Under the first strategy, called Campaign I, the existing restrictions on bombing North Vietnam would be lifted to allow for more air strikes against a broader target base without regard to civilian damage or casualties. The principal targets would include military headquarters, government control points, population centers harboring vehicles and materiel, the ports of Haiphong, Cam Pha, and Hon Gai (all three harbors would be mined), over-the-beach materiel centers, the northeast and northwest rail lines, and roads contiguous to the North Vietnamese-Chinese border.

Campaign I would focus on the North above the 20th parallel and consist of two types of operations: air harassment of the enemy to raise his defense costs, inflate manpower needs, reduce productivity, and cause problems in distribution, management, and other internal affairs; and heavier air attacks on significant targets to increase casualties, destroy more military potential, ruin

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rice crops, and close ports and harbors. The North's road, rail, and port capability, down from 15,000 to 8,000 short tons per day, could be lowered to 4,000 to 2,000 tons per day. Air harassment could reduce imports by about 25 percent, an amount probably insufficient to end the war decisively, whereas strikes on ports and mining of harbors would reduce imports by 75 to 90 percent. To accomplish these tasks, the Air Staff proposed a total of 170,000 combat sorties annually: 120,000 by USAF tactical and B-52 aircraft, 35,000 by the Navy, and 15,000 by the Marines. The expected rise in aircraft losses and munition expenditures would require an additional \$2.5 billion, although the dollar outlays might be cut by using more guided bombs and substituting B-52's for tactical air strikes on a one for 10 basis.

~~SECRET~~ Secretary Brown believed that Soviet reaction to Campaign I probably would consist of a hardened attitude toward the United States, some diversionary action against West Berlin and along the Korean DMZ, and a step-up in the delivery of supplies, equipment, and MIG's--including possibly Soviet pilots--to the North. The Chinese also would likely increase logistic and maintenance forces already in the North (estimated at 50,000), and occupy ports of northern North Vietnam if they felt that the bombing threatened the Hanoi government. However, Dr. Brown pointed out that more study was needed on possible reaction of the Soviet Union, China, and other countries.

~~SECRET~~ The Air Staff, on the other hand, believed that Moscow's response would be less severe than anticipated by Secretary Brown. It thought the Soviets might apply some pressure outside of Southeast Asia but probably would not use military forces to create a diversion. Thus Campaign I could force Hanoi to slow the tempo of fighting and eventually seek a compromise or to abandon the war. If it began in March, the campaign's maximum effect would be felt by October when bad weather normally restricted the bombing and allowed the North Vietnamese to improve their transportation system.

~~SECRET~~ The analysis for the second strategy, Campaign II, was prepared by an Operations Analysis-Rand study group. It suggested various measures for exerting more pressure on the North Vietnamese-Laotian panhandles: diverting only USAF or all U.S. sorties from route packages IV through VI to route packages I through

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III and in the Laos panhandle,* interdicting selected LOC "belts" in southern North Vietnam, adding antipersonnel air strikes, using new land mines, and launching more B-52 attacks against LOC's in the Mu Gia and Ban Korai passes in Laos. The strategy further called for tripling the current sortie rate to produce a 10-fold increase, compared with 1967, in the destruction of trucks. Also proposed was stepped-up harassment of enemy repair crews and supply handlers to cause more delay in his transport of supplies.

~~_____~~ The Air Force Secretary acknowledged the difficulty in limiting significantly the movement of Communist supplies by bombing. A study showed that the North Vietnamese had transported more goods than they required for operations despite "our most optimistic estimates of current damage, given the current rate of imports." To reduce the supply flow to a minimum meant improving air effectiveness "by a factor of four." He thought there was "an even chance" of achieving this by using new or improved sensors, aircraft, and munitions, and by flying more sorties. If 120 trucks could be destroyed each day, Dr. Brown surmised, the Communists would find it most difficult to move many of them from China to the North Vietnamese and Laotian panhandles, refuel them en route, and provide the necessary support for 30,000 people manning the routes.²

~~_____~~ The third strategy, Campaign III, called for a basic change in ground strategy and for more reliance on air power. It assumed that search and destroy operations had not given the South Vietnamese meaningful security and held no realistic promise of doing so. Thus, South Vietnamese and American ground forces would re-deploy to give maximum protection to the heavily populated cities, ports, and adjacent rural areas. Once the population was secure, the Viet Cong infrastructure could be routed out. This was the "oil spot" concept tried earlier but never on a realistic basis. The free-fire zones outside of the secure areas would be subject to day and night air attacks by AC-47, AC-119, and AC-130 gunships, other tactical aircraft, and B-52's. Ground forces would hit main enemy units at a reasonable distance from the population centers.

~~_____~~ The principal demands of Campaign III would require an additional 126 FAC aircraft, 125 gunships, and 172 other tactical fighter aircraft to assure 24-hour surveillance and immediate air

*See map p48.

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strikes. This strategy would accept somewhat higher aircraft attrition rates and relinquish territory to the enemy; as areas became secure, allied troops would move outward. Because of large casualties inflicted upon the enemy, his tempo of operations would slow down and eventually lead to tacit stabilization of the conflict at a lower level of intensity.

Campaign III required no increase in American ground troops. By safeguarding the population from terrorism, the Saigon government could concentrate on developing leadership and other programs that could generate enthusiastic support. In time, this scheme would enhance prospects for a compromise in a political settlement for all South Vietnam.³

As part of the Campaign III withdrawal of allied forces to secure limited areas, the Air Force proposed, as a beginning, the evacuation of Khe Sanh. Within six months the limited areas would be adequately protected, then extended, and in 18 months the Saigon government would have sufficient control over most of the population and other resources in South Vietnam (in three-fourths of the country) to permit initial departure of U.S. ground forces. This objective would call for tight population control, a necessity demonstrated in previous insurgencies by the British in Malaya and the French in Indochina and Algeria.

In conjunction with expanding air action, the Air Staff recommended creating a center to consolidate the processing and evaluating of sensor data for "real time" evaluation of intelligence.

The Air Staff conceded there were risks in Campaign III. The Communists probably would try to establish a government in the areas initially relinquished by the allies, although air attacks on facilities and installations might prevent this. Also Hanoi might call for a cease-fire and propose a military status quo for both sides. If this were accepted, the United States would, of course, have to forego its objective of bringing all of South Vietnam under the control of the Saigon government.

Subsequent study led the Air Staff to conclude that the effective implementation of any of the three air campaigns would require a minimum of 1,101 USAF, Navy, Marine, and VNAF aircraft, 105 B-52's, and 104 gunships. This force could provide a total of

44,123 combat sorties per month as follows: tactical aircraft, 39,720; B-52's, 2,200; and gunships, 2,203.

~~SECRET~~ Although developed separately, General McConnell felt the three campaigns should be combined into a single military concept "with a reasonable probability of providing the decisive impact required to achieve early settlement of the conflict." He solicited JCS support in requesting Secretary Clifford to recognize that, contrary to the administration's view, the war in South and North Vietnam was inseparable. The alternatives to "new and decisive emphasis on air operations against the North," he pointed out, were higher American costs for each cycle of enemy destructiveness leading eventually to a military standoff or a politically disadvantageous withdrawal of U.S. forces. General McConnell's proposal was made several days after the President had ordered a partial bombing halt and the JCS did not act upon it.⁴

~~SECRET~~ At Secretary Clifford's request, another high-level appraisal of the three air strategies took place on 9 April when Air Staff representatives reviewed them with five members of the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC). The conferees agreed that Campaign I required the removal of air restrictions and better munitions. They also agreed that 20-mm cannons and incendiary munitions had proved thus far to be the most effective weapons against enemy trucks.⁵

~~SECRET~~ There was further study of the strategies, but on 10 May U.S. and North Vietnamese representatives made an initial contact preparatory to peace talks. By then the adoption of the Air Force's three strategies, especially Campaign I, appeared remote. Mr. Hoopes, in fact, subsequently advised Secretary Clifford to resist pressures to resume the bombing in North Vietnam. He believed that Hanoi's intransigence or its willingness to cooperate at the peace talks should dictate a ground strategy emphasizing shorter defense lines, better protection for the South Vietnamese people, and lower American casualties. He thought OSD should be ready with a plan based on such a strategy.⁶

*See Chapter V.