

The Soldier as Ambassador: Maxwell Taylor in Saigon, 1964-65

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On 2 July 1964, 62-year old Maxwell Davenport Taylor stood on the steps of the White House, taking the oath for still another position of public service. In the previous three years he had served as Military Representative of the President (Kennedy) and, under Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Now, as the dark cloud of Vietnam overshadowed this bright, hot day in Washington, it was Secretary of State Rusk who held the Bible as Taylor became our Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam. Why had the four-star general exchanged his uniform for a diplomat's suit? And why was he bound for Saigon?

The incumbent Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, had been part and parcel of the Diem overthrow the previous November; since that time the South Vietnam government had been floundering and the Viet Cong had become more of a threat than ever. But the Republican Party needed Lodge to participate in the 1964 presidential campaign, and Johnson needed a new ambassador for this crucial post. Volunteers came, interestingly from members of his cabinet: the Secretary of State himself, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy. When JCS Chairman Taylor, somewhat reluctantly, also put his name in the hat, LBJ decided to appoint him. Taylor accepted on the basis that his Saigon assignment would be for only about a year.

Mr. Ambassador

Taylor's letter of instructions from President Johnson—drafted by Taylor himself—was the most powerful charter given an American Ambassador to Vietnam. It read in part:

As you take charge of the American effort in South Vietnam, I want you to have this formal expression not only of my confidence, but of my desire that you have and exercise full responsibility for the effort of the United States Government in South Vietnam. I wish it clearly understood that this overall responsibility includes the whole military effort in South Vietnam and authorizes the degree of command and control that you consider appropriate.¹

Saigon in that summer was not yet overpowered by the American presence, as it would be, say, two years later. Truly the Pearl of the Orient with its tree-lined boulevards, French architecture, and Western culture, it still reminded visitors of Paris. The city of perhaps one and a half million would soon expand dramatically as the war stepped up. Taylor's downtown headquarters (later, when replaced, known as the old embassy) was in a nondescript building, something like a furniture showroom in lower Manhattan. His residence, though, was an impressive white stucco villa in the old residential part of the capital.

Shortly after arriving in Vietnam, Taylor held a staff meeting at which General Westmoreland, the MACV Commander, was present. The new Ambassador set forth these basic goals: achieving political stability in South Vietnam, preventing the enemy from taking over the country, and preparing the government of South Vietnam (GVN) for a counteroffensive against the Viet Cong. And he added:

The Sino-Soviet bloc is watching attentively the course of events in South Vietnam to see whether subversive insurgency is indeed the form which the "wave of the future" will take. In stating the US objectives in South Vietnam, it is important to note . . . we are not seeking to reunify North and South Vietnam—our objective does not extend beyond enforcing the Geneva Convention of 1954. Failure in Southeast Asia would destroy US influence throughout Asia and severely damage our standing elsewhere throughout the world. It would be the prelude to the loss or neutralization of all of Southeast Asia and the absorption of that area into the Chinese empire.²

One thorn in the side of American decisionmakers following the death of Diem, and for several years thereafter, was the so-called revolving door government of South Vietnam. It was particularly painful at the time of Taylor's arrival. The government at the moment was that of General Nguyen Khanh, the Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council, and the four

generals who served as his principal assistants. Technically, General “Big” Minh was Chief of State, but Khanh had deprived him of any real authority after seizing power in January. Constant changes kept the new Ambassador on a merry-go-round.

On 2 August 1964 came an event that would have a dramatic impact on the war: a North Vietnamese torpedo boat attacked the US destroyer *Maddox* in international waters. Then, on 4 August, North Vietnamese craft were reported to have again attacked the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy*, which had joined it. In retaliation, President Johnson decided to strike at the base of the attacking boats, with American carriers launching 64 sorties.

But the more far-reaching result of the North Vietnamese attacks was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, passed by Congress on 10 August. The vote in the House was 416-0; in the Senate, 88-2. It empowered the President to use whatever force was necessary to assist South Vietnam and the other allies of the United States in Southeast Asia. The resolution, which the National Security Council had been preparing since June, was sitting on the shelf awaiting the proper occasion. It reads in part: “The Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”³ But the Commander in Chief was in the middle of an election campaign. For the moment he put the resolution in his pocket, but it was to reappear with telling effect the following year.

The Autumn Debate

How to maintain political stability in Saigon was still the most crucial issue that autumn of 1964. American decisionmakers felt that in order to make the South Vietnamese government confident of American resolve, we needed to hit the North. Leaders in both Washington and Saigon started debating just what kind of action to embark upon. The principal action officers in Washington were William Bundy at State and John McNaughton at Defense—and in Saigon, Maxwell Taylor.

Just before mid-August the officials in Washington had prepared a draft memorandum that considered a variety of military actions, including sustained air operations against the North. These would begin at the lower end of the

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spectrum and gradually work up—at first tit-for-tat air strikes in reprisal for major communist actions and then, by January, dramatic bombing of targets in North Vietnam, along with the mining of Haiphong Harbor. Taylor favored this strategy on the whole. He did not want any heavy action until January, when the Khanh regime would have had time to stabilize. (And, one supposes, he had in mind that the American presidential election would be over.)

When Taylor made his first return trip to Washington in early September of 1964, he stressed how shaky the Khanh government was.⁴ Although fairly pessimistic about the war, he felt that we could not turn back now. After hearing Taylor, the President approved on 10 September NASM 314. The document gave priority to actions within South Vietnam but also approved resuming the clandestine activities along the North Vietnamese coast that had been suspended after the Tonkin Gulf incident. Moreover, it provided for reprisal air raids against North Vietnam in the event of significant actions by the enemy.

During October the 1964 presidential election kept Vietnam policy decisions on the back burner. Then, on the eve of the election, the Viet Cong mortared the airfield at Bien Hoa, destroying or damaging 27 B-57s and killing four Americans. Cabling from Saigon, Taylor urged retaliatory strikes against North Vietnam. He considered this enemy action—deliberate targeting of a major American installation—a turning point in their tactics. Johnson, about to be reelected by a landslide against Goldwater (who was alleged to be trigger-happy), rejected the Ambassador's recommendation.

The President did, however, intervene a couple of days later by establishing an interagency working group chaired by William Bundy of State and John McNaughton of Defense. He asked them to review the situation and, by late November, to come up with an appropriate strategy to discuss with the NSC principals: Rusk, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, McNamara, John McCone, and JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler. They were to consider these three options: to continue along present lines; to embark quietly on systematic military pressures against the North designed to cause them to opt for negotiations; or to follow an in-between program of more limited and gradual military pressures.⁵ During the November review, Ambassador Taylor cabled his own views. Just after mid-month Michael Forrestal went to Saigon to show Taylor the papers being developed, thus giving him a chance to feel out Washington thinking before his next trip there.

Taylor's own summation found a "mounting feeling of war-weariness and hopelessness," particularly in the urban areas of South Vietnam. Yet, for their part, the Viet Cong had shown "an amazing ability to maintain morale" and extraordinary staying power in the face of heavy losses. Without trying to explain reasons, such as ideology, for this Viet Cong toughness, Taylor focused on support from the North.

We need to do three things: first, establish an adequate government in SVN [South Vietnam]; second, improve the conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign; and finally, persuade or force the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] to stop its aid to the Viet-Cong and to use its directive powers to make the Viet-Cong desist from their efforts to overthrow the government of South Viet Nam. If, . . . as hoped, the government maintains and proves itself, then we should be prepared to embark on a methodical program of mounting air attacks. . . . We will leave negotiation initiatives to Hanoi.

Taylor suggested three principles to which the United States should adhere whatever the course of events:

- Do not enter into negotiations until the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is hurting.
- Never let the DRV gain a victory in South Vietnam without having to pay a disproportionate price.
- Keep the South Vietnamese government in the forefront of the campaign and the negotiations.⁶

Reinforcing the work of the Washington group, the Taylor memorandum went at once to LBJ, who was in Texas. Perhaps more than any of the Washington papers, it influenced the President's decisions of early December.

Taylor arrived in Washington on Thanksgiving Day, 26 November 1964. The following afternoon he had a full meeting with Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Wheeler, McGeorge Bundy, McNaughton, Forrestal, and Bill Bundy. The Ambassador told them that he must have a strong message to take back to Saigon. It should combine an expression of American resolve and readiness to take military action with specific stabilizing tasks for the South Vietnamese government to carry out. He felt that this combination, correctly implemented, would bring improvement, though slowly. In this, Taylor differed from McNamara, who was doubtful that the military situation would improve and who was pessimistic about the political side.

The group then turned to Taylor's military approach, consisting of two phases. In the first, to last for a month or two, we would expand American military actions and be prepared to conduct reprisals. In the second phase, we would move to a systematic but gradual program of bombing and other military pressures.

What had to be determined presently, though, was the message for Taylor to take to the leaders in Saigon. The President made clear above all else that he would never consider stronger action against the North unless he was sure that we had done all we could to help in the South. In effect, the President was saying to Taylor: If you want this bombing program, you must get the Saigon political leaders in line. (It was typical of LBJ to give a personal charge to his guidance.) These 1 December discussions were reflected in the instructions to Taylor approved by the President on the 3d. In addition, the

approved document proposed that both South Vietnam and the United States should be ready to execute prompt reprisals for any enemy action of an unusually hostile nature.⁷

Key to the President's message was the statement that the United States was "prepared to consider" a second phase of direct military pressure on Hanoi, to be carried out after the Saigon government was firmly in control of itself. The conditional American intent to start bombing of the North was a big step—going much further than LBJ had previously gone in committing the United States to actions against the North.

After the 1 December meeting came a formal White House statement of a very general nature. Intended to convey a firm basic posture but no more, it said that the President had instructed Ambassador Taylor "to consult urgently with the South Vietnamese government as to measures that should be taken to improve the situation in all its aspects."

The Ambassador's subsequent conversations in Saigon carried out to the full Johnson's instruction to "get the message across to everyone." Taylor met first with President Suu, Prime Minister Huong, and General Khanh as commander of the armed forces; then in separate groups with the senior civilians and top military men. Now, more than ever, the United States seemed to be Big Brother, calling the shots; undoubtedly, there was some wounding of South Vietnamese pride.⁸

A Shaky Domino

The month after his return from Washington was a tough period for Ambassador Taylor. Another crisis in the Saigon government resulted in more political upsets. The military was split, and some young generals even kidnaped their older colleagues. All this seemed such a direct repudiation of President Johnson's message that the Ambassador gave the miscreants a severe lecture. But he soon had to concern himself with other matters.

As the political crisis went on, the Viet Cong were continuing their activity, while desertions abounded in the South Vietnamese forces. Then, on 24 December, a violent action against Americans tested the pledge of retaliation made by LBJ earlier that month. This Christmas Eve catastrophe occurred right in downtown Saigon at the Brinks Hotel, quarters for American officers. A Viet Cong squad detonated explosives that killed two Americans and wounded 52 Americans and Vietnamese.

Taylor promptly cabled his recommendation: use the new policy for an air strike just above the 17th parallel. But the President, who was in Texas when the cable arrived, deferred a decision. By the end of December, when Secretary Rusk journeyed to Texas to see LBJ on this, the answer he sent to Taylor was no.

The beginning of 1965 meant the end of the 30-day testing period for the South Vietnamese political climate. Taylor's strong view was that,

notwithstanding Saigon's political weakness, we should go ahead with the gradual bombing program against the North—the second phase of the plan decided on in early December. His point was that we might help stabilize the South Vietnamese government if its leaders saw us taking strong action when needed. Taylor's case for bombing, then, rested on morale and on political performance in the South. He did not feel that either the military results of the bombing or the effect on Hanoi's will would soon lead to a settlement or to putting down the Viet Cong threat.

On 5 January 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff pointed out to the President that, although the 30 days were up, they had no orders for stronger actions leading up to bombing the North. But LBJ was not ready to make such decisions. He was busy on his domestic program and on messages to go to Congress in late January and February. All other energies were reserved for the celebration of his inauguration on 20 January—Lyndon Johnson's final moment of glory before the darkness of Vietnam enveloped him.

Pleiku and Its Aftermath

In early 1965 a sense of crisis was building in South Vietnam. Clearly gaining in strength, the Viet Cong began operating as battalions and larger units employing Russian- and Chinese-made weapons. The embassy estimated that the Viet Cong had about 30,000 regular troops and 70,000 part-time guerrillas. South Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces were dispirited, and the government in Saigon had become a *mélange* of factions, all maneuvering for control but none exercising it. To defer American military action while awaiting greater political stability in Saigon seemed less and less a good idea.⁹

Early in January, Westmoreland had sought and received the President's permission for American jets to support South Vietnamese troops on combat missions in border regions. By now the North Vietnamese had deployed up to six main force regiments there. The American involvement was beginning to accelerate. On 27 January, McNamara and McGeorge Bundy met with LBJ after they decided that we needed more of a punch to prevent a knockout in South Vietnam. They saw two alternatives: use American military power to force North Vietnam to change policy, or, in some other way, convince the other side to begin negotiations. They favored the first.¹⁰

The President agreed that it was time for us to get tough militarily. First, though, he wanted to take stock of the Vietnam situation once more to demonstrate that he was considering every option. Earlier, Taylor had suggested that McGeorge Bundy come out to get a better grasp of Saigon's plight. An outcome of the 27 January meeting was the President's approval of this visit; thus, on 2 February, McGeorge Bundy, McNaughton from Defense, and General Andy Goodpaster from JCS left for Vietnam.

What Bundy saw in Vietnam led him to propose a steady and continuing reprisal program instead of the tit-for-tat reactions that followed the Tonkin Gulf episode. Actually, although LBJ needed very little convincing at this point, events themselves, rather than any particular report, were pushing him into directing a new strategy for Vietnam. One such event was the incident at Pleiku.

When Bundy was preparing to return to Washington early on 7 February, the Viet Cong made a mortar attack on an American base at Pleiku in the central highlands. They killed eight Americans, wounded more than a hundred, and destroyed ten aircraft. Bundy, Taylor, and Westmoreland—all together in Saigon—decided that we must retaliate, and Bundy telephoned that to Washington. About four hours after the attack, LBJ presided at an extraordinary meeting that included House Speaker John McCormick and Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield. Only Mansfield was opposed to retaliation. The President ordered an immediate attack on preselected targets, with more in the works. Taylor, delighted, wrote to his son that same week: “We finally seem to have turned a corner and adopted a more realistic policy to the conduct of the war. I have been working and waiting for a year and a half to get to this point.”¹¹

NSC members huddled frequently during the days after the Pleiku incident. At an 8 February meeting President Johnson summarized his position: in December he had approved a program to pressure North Vietnam but had delayed implementing it until the South Vietnamese could stabilize their government. “We are now ready to return to our program of pushing forward in an effort to defeat North Vietnamese aggression without escalating the war.” After the meeting LBJ had a message for Taylor: “I have today decided that we will carry out our December plan for continuing action against North Vietnam with modifications up and down in tempo and scale in the light of your recommendations as Bundy reports them, and our own continuing review of the situation.”

Taylor’s 12 February response offered his thoughts about the strategy of graduated air reprisals: “In review of the rationale for concept of graduated reprisals we are of the opinion that, in order of importance, it should have the following objectives: the will of Hanoi leaders; GVN morale; and physical destruction to reduce the DRV ability to support the VC.”¹²

About the same time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, responding to an earlier McNamara request, came forward with an air strike schedule. They also proposed deploying a US Marine brigade to Danang for securing an American air base from which to launch the attacks.

On 13 February 1965, President Johnson set in motion Rolling Thunder, a program of measured and limited air action against selected targets in North Vietnam. The first bombs fell on 2 March and would continue, with frequent pauses, for the next three and a half years. The Administration called Rolling

Thunder a response to “continued acts of aggression by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese.” But it was a new direction in American policy. The United States was, in fact, now at war with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Would bombing provoke Chinese Communists to march into Vietnam? With that fear in mind, the President and the Secretary of Defense kept close control over the air strikes. A dispute between LBJ’s military and civilian advisers revolved around what the bombing was all about. In general, the civilians wanted gradualism—more than the Joint Chiefs did—both in pace and targeting; they believed that Hanoi would “get the signal” that the United States was serious about the war in Vietnam and would accordingly stop supporting the Viet Cong.¹³

Taylor, the four-star general in a diplomatic suit, was not for heavy bombing of North Vietnam. In that sense he was a gradualist, trying to pressure—but in a controlled way—Hanoi’s leaders to negotiate. He did, however, become annoyed with the long pauses between strikes and with the concerted behind-the-scenes diplomatic maneuvering against the bombing by the British and French in particular (“our friends,” as Taylor called them). An early March cable from Taylor to Washington gives the flavor:

In my view current developments strongly suggest that we follow simultaneously two courses of action:

(1) attempt to apply brakes to British and others in their headlong dash to conference table

(2) step up tempo and intensity of our air strikes in southern part of DRV in order convince Hanoi they face prospect of progressively severe punishment. I fear that to date ROLLING THUNDER in their eyes has been merely a few isolated thunder claps.¹⁴

Taylor’s other expectation in connection with Rolling Thunder was, unfortunately, not met—that is, his desire to slow down committing American ground forces to shore up the deteriorating tactical situation in South Vietnam. The Ambassador felt that the South Vietnamese should, if possible, fight their own war; further, to commit American troops was also to commit American prestige—in a very tenuous situation indeed. This may seem at odds with his recommendation in the Taylor-Rostow report about three and a half years earlier, but there is a bureaucratic reality to consider. Maxwell Taylor was no longer a kibitzer from the White House staff on a field visit; he was the senior American in Vietnam, chartered by the President to take charge of our effort.

Ironically, the earlier decision to use American close air support in the South was, when combined with the Rolling Thunder decision, what triggered the American ground force deployment. It was clear after Pleiku that

airfields with American aircraft could be secured only by ground troops—and that these would have to be American. Of our three major air bases in Vietnam (Saigon, Bien Hoa, and Danang), the one at Danang was the most vulnerable to enemy action.

Though Taylor continued to oppose introducing US ground forces, he had to admit that some American troops were necessary to protect the Danang field. But when he agreed, the JCS cabled that they were sending an entire Marine brigade of more than 5000 troops armed with artillery, tanks, and their own aircraft. Taylor objected. Washington compromised, reducing the contingent to two Marine battalion landing teams composed of about 3500 troops. Almost immediately, on 8 March 1965, they came ashore in battle dress, with flags flying and full media coverage. American prestige was now definitely on the line.

Meanwhile, the Washington bureaucrats were taking potshots at soldier-statesman Taylor. McGeorge Bundy's memorandum to the President on 6 March said that if it were up to him and McNamara, they "would bring Taylor back and put Alex Johnson in charge with a younger man [as deputy]."¹⁵ (The younger man was presumably John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense). Although nothing came of the recommendation, it shows that some Washington insiders were getting frustrated with Ambassador Taylor.

While Taylor's desire for air strikes had now been realized, he was still trying to hold back the push for introducing sizable numbers of American ground troops. That push came from the JCS and others in Washington—helped along by a recommendation from Harold K. Johnson, Army Chief and a Vietnam visitor at LBJ's request. On 16 March General Johnson advised committing an Army division to Vietnam for security, plus up to four divisions of US and allied SEATO forces along the demilitarized zone.

Moreover, Westmoreland was no longer in tandem with his old boss Taylor. The general was recommending that an Army division and a separate brigade, besides the Marines, be sent to Vietnam. Earlier, Westy and his former chief had bumped heads over the 8 March landing of the Marines. To hear it in Westmoreland's words:

Word of the time of the landing got to me from the Joint Chiefs before it reached the Embassy, and even though I notified the Embassy, the word apparently failed to get to the ambassador in advance. He was visibly piqued, his upset accentuated because the Marines had arrived with tanks, self-propelled artillery, and other heavy equipment he had not expected. "Do you know my terms of reference," Ambassador Taylor demanded sharply, "and that I have authority over you?" "I understand fully," I replied, "and I appreciate it completely, Mr. Ambassador." That ended the matter.¹⁶

For the moment Taylor parried the pressures for troops. He cabled the President his "devout hope that we were not about to rush in and take over

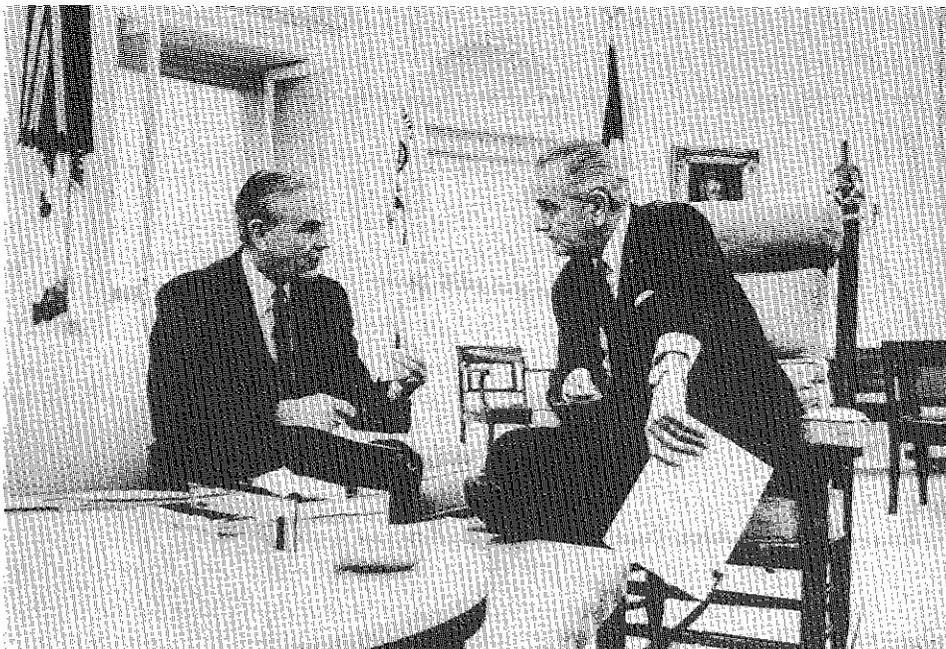
the conduct of the war from the Vietnamese.” But events were moving rapidly, and LBJ called his Ambassador back for Washington consultations at the end of March.

The April Days

About the time Taylor descended on Washington, McGeorge Bundy wrote to LBJ about the scheduled 31 March meeting between the President and his Ambassador: “The three problems on Max’s mind are these: (1) The timing and direction of attack on the North; (2) The timing, size, and mission of any US combat deployments to Vietnam; and (3) The terms and conditions of a political resolution of the problem. He has done more thinking on (1) and (2) than on (3)—and so have we.”¹⁷

LBJ gathered his Vietnam advisers around him on the 1st and 2d of April 1965. He wanted to talk over many matters, such as nonmilitary programs, the bombing campaign, and—what most concerned Taylor—whether we should send more troops to Vietnam. To that the Ambassador was still opposed, despite urging from Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson and MACV commander William Westmoreland, who was requesting two divisions.

Taylor succeeded—or felt that he had—in preventing that commitment, but he did go along with two more Marine battalions and more logistical troops. What really counted, though, was the President’s decision to let the Marines



Home from Saigon in September 1964, Ambassador Taylor confers with President Lyndon Johnson in the White House.

patrol beyond the airfields they were guarding. On the surface, this was just a sensible precaution; but on a deeper level it was a change of mission.

On 7 April LBJ made a major policy statement. Speaking at Johns Hopkins University, he declared, "Our objective is the independence of South Vietnam and its freedom from attack." Now events began to move rapidly. On 13 April, McGeorge Bundy informed Taylor, who was back in Saigon, that "additional troops are important, if not decisive." The next day Taylor picked up a JCS message that had been sent to him for information. It contained startling news: a US Army airborne brigade was to be deployed to Vietnam as soon as possible. Alarmed, the Ambassador cabled Washington immediately:

I have just learned . . . that the immediate deployment of the 173d Airborne Brigade has apparently been approved. This comes as a complete surprise in view of the understanding reached in Washington that we would experiment with the Marines . . . before bringing in other US contingents. . . . I should think that for both military and political reasons we should all be most reluctant to tie down Army/Marine units in this country.¹⁸

In a 14 April memorandum to the President, Bundy noted the Ambassador's sensitivity. He cautioned about a cable that McNamara was planning to send to Taylor (which LBJ had approved the day before), detailing the troop deployments:

Bob McNamara may bring over a cable to Taylor this evening which will rack up a number of instructions to the field. . . . My own judgment is that direct orders of this sort to Taylor would be very explosive right now because he will not agree with many of them and he will feel that he has not been consulted. . . . I am sure we can turn him around if we give him just a little time to come aboard.¹⁹

Then, on the next day, came the message from McGeorge to Max, telling him that in effect he had been overruled by his Commander in Chief: "President's belief is that current situation requires use of all practicable means of strengthening position in South Vietnam and that additional US troops are important if not decisive reinforcement."²⁰

Taylor was not quite finished. On the 17th of April he sent two more cables off to Washington. One noted his deputy Alex Johnson's observations against American troop commitment. The other, summarizing the instructions received over the previous ten days, expressed astonishment at developments since the 1 and 2 April meetings with the President.²¹

To calm the Ambassador, Bundy responded that after hearing Taylor's concerns, the President was suspending action until after a high-level meeting in Honolulu on 20 April. Taylor would be there, along with McNamara, Wheeler, Westmoreland, Bill Bundy, and others. In his diary Taylor tells about what transpired at the conference:

We first considered the question of the introduction of additional US and third country combat forces. There was no disagreement in estimating the situation. We all considered that since we could not hope to break the will of Hanoi by bombing alone, we must do better in the campaign against the Viet Cong in SVN [South Vietnam].

He relates that no one expected an end within six months, no matter how the pressures were combined, and that “no one advocated attacking Hanoi.” Air strikes on present targets plus other vital targets in the north would suffice for the present. He stressed that “repetition of the same level of attack” was itself a form of escalation. He then turned to the subject most on his mind—US troops:

With regard to the need for additional US combat troops . . . we agreed on a Phase I which would call for the introduction into SVN of nine US battalions and four third country battalions between now and the end of summer. With the present in-country strength of about 33,000 this reinforcement would bring the US personnel to about 82,000, with something over 7000 third country troops in addition. We recognized that it might be necessary to follow with a Phase II and III. . . . Final totals in that case would be 123,000 US and about 22,000 third country combat forces.²²

Powerful charter or not, Ambassador Taylor was now, after the Honolulu decisions, a background figure in Vietnam. Coming to the fore was the MACV commander, General Westmoreland.

The July 1965 Decisions

On 28 April, Prime Minister Quat informed Taylor that South Vietnam went along with the American troop increase, and in early May, LBJ sent a message to Congress requesting more money for our growing military requirements in Vietnam. But would there be any Vietnam left to support? By late May, that was the real question. The long-awaited Viet Cong summer offensive had jumped off on 11 May. Everybody’s nightmare of a speedy and total collapse of the South appeared possible. In June the communists pushed ahead on the central highlands, trying to cut the country in two.

By 3 June, Taylor was cabling Washington his latest assessment of Hanoi’s determination. If we were to bring the North Vietnamese around, bombing alone would not do the trick: “Such a change in DRV attitudes can probably be brought about only when, along with a sense of mounting pain from the bombings, there is also a conviction on their part that the tide has turned or soon will turn against them in the South.”²³ Taylor was back on the team.

Westmoreland, wanting to take the offensive with large-scale reinforcements, asked for a speedy deployment of US and third-country combat forces. The MACV commander was clearly in charge in Saigon, while Ambassador

Taylor was by now playing for time; his agreed-upon one-year tour was almost up—much to his own relief and that of some others.

With Taylor now supporting Westmoreland's program, there was a general call to arms. Only a few Washington leaders were still holdouts, most prominently Undersecretary of State George Ball. Then, there were those, such as Bill Bundy at State, who were in between Ball and Westmoreland. Before Honolulu, Taylor may have supported the in-between position effectively, but now he was silent. The old soldier saw the handwriting: the movement toward war was inexorable, and nothing was going to stop it. The question was how many troops and how soon.

On 16 July the President dispatched his top advisers to Saigon. Besides McNamara and Generals Wheeler and Goodpaster, the visitors included Henry Cabot Lodge, Taylor's predecessor and now soon to be announced as his successor. But the purpose of the visit was suddenly overtaken when, on 17 July, McNamara received a cable while in Vietnam: the President had decided to go ahead with McNamara's earlier proposal to strengthen the military to 44 battalions. Moreover, Johnson ordered McNamara to return home and complete his recommendations immediately. As Westmoreland later wrote, "Our July discussions turned out, in a way, to be moot." Lyndon Baines Johnson had already decided how to save South Vietnam.²⁴

Now it was time for Taylor to depart from Saigon and to file the customary evaluation of the situation. He felt that the United States had during his tenure as Ambassador developed a coherent strategy; if we persisted in it, we could attain an independent South Vietnam free from attack. But when Taylor left Saigon, we had begun an actual American war. By its end the number of Americans killed in action would be exceeded only by the two World Wars and the Civil War. And it would be the only war we ever lost.

Just before he returned to Washington and a new assignment, Taylor was off to Cam Ranh Bay to witness the arrival of his World War II outfit, the 101st Airborne Division. It was an inspiring day, clear and with the wind whipping in from the South China Sea. In an atmosphere heavily laden with ironic symbolism, Taylor gave the welcome speech. Talking sternly of the traditions of the great division, he concluded with a World War II punch line relating to Bastogne: "The Germans have nine divisions surrounding us—the poor bastards." The scene was so much like a movie—all slightly unreal—that it could have been great fun, except for the reality of Vietnam.

Observations

The tour as Ambassador to Saigon in 1964-65 was Maxwell Taylor's high noon in relation to Vietnam. That was also the most important year for presidential decisions leading to the US combat role. In the summer of 1964

most options were still open for Lyndon Johnson; by the following summer there were none—except to escalate the war.

When Taylor arrived in Saigon in July 1964, his charter was the most powerful ever given an American ambassador. In effect, he was in control of American military forces in that country. Had this charter been granted to a bona fide civilian, the American military undoubtedly would have objected. Actually, Taylor never made full use of the charter. Instead, he created a Mission Council composed of the senior US officials of the various government agencies represented in Saigon, including MACV. In theory this council was the forum for working out decisions. In fact everyone looked to his own fiefdom in Washington for guidance and instructions.

As for Ambassador Taylor's strategic views, two should be stressed: the role of bombing, and the employment of American combat troops. Taylor's views on both matters were not exactly what one would suppose given his background, and he did not fully prevail in either. Still, he had become a kind of icon for the President to display when LBJ needed credibility on Vietnam, at least with a certain constituency.

Taylor as JCS Chairman earlier and as Ambassador strongly advocated the efficacy of bombing the North. He saw it both as a deterrent to Hanoi's aggression in the South and as a way to prod the foe to the negotiating table. This explains the Ambassador's early attempts, albeit unsuccessful, to get LBJ to bomb the North as retaliation for the VC mortaring of the Bien Hoa air base and the dynamiting of the Brinks Hotel. Particularly noteworthy was his delight when the President finally did approve bombing after the Pleiku incident in early February; for this, Taylor had been "working and waiting for a year and a half." Although a gradualist, to a point, in the application of bombing, he did not support the notion of the bombing pauses. In this sense he was his own man, somewhere between the JCS—who wanted all-out bombing—and the Defense civilians who viewed it as a kind of faucet to turn on and off; their assumption was that Hanoi leaders understood what their Washington counterparts were doing and would respond in a reasonable way—which they did not.

Taylor's real *bête noir*, however, was the ground force commitment. As the spring of 1965 wore on, it was clear that American bombing had not broken the will of the North Vietnamese; thus the US Marines, introduced to protect the airfields from which Rolling Thunder was launched, were permitted to maneuver in the countryside.

During the April 1965 trip to Washington when the decision was made to allow the Marines to operate out of their enclave, Taylor resisted the commitment of additional American ground forces that Westmoreland was urging. But as it turned out, such a commitment was also desired by "Highest Authority," meaning, in the lexicon of cable traffic, Lyndon Baines Johnson. Up to the end

of his trip, Taylor felt that he had carried the day. At this evidence that LBJ was assuming the initiative, the Ambassador was caught short. He had a brief sparring match on the issue with McNamara and Westmoreland during the Honolulu meeting later in April. Taylor lost. It was a momentous defeat that wrote finis to the fiction of the all-powerful Ambassador. But always flexible in the long run, Taylor later modified his position, coming to feel that perhaps the United States had waited too long to commit American ground forces.

Despite defeat on the matter of troop commitments, Taylor finished his year as Ambassador and was still willing to serve the President. His letter of resignation indicated that he was ready to assume new responsibilities for his Commander in Chief, and indeed he became a consultant to LBJ on Vietnam and a public advocate of the Administration's war policies. But that is another story.

NOTES

1. Letter quoted in *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), III, 79.
2. Paper with title "US Objectives in Southeast Asia," contained in Maxwell D. Taylor Papers, National Defense University Library (hereafter NDUL).
3. Public Law 88-409, passed 10 August 1964.
4. Taylor tells his version of the trip in his book *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), pp. 320-21; and in chapters 25-28 he discusses at some length the personalities of the South Vietnamese government leaders with whom he had to deal at that point.
5. From the unpublished manuscript of William Bundy, which he made available to me at the Council of Foreign Relations Building in New York and is now deposited in the John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson presidential libraries. It is of considerable assistance in clarifying President Johnson's actions on Vietnam during the 1964-1965 period.
6. *Pentagon Papers*, III, 666-73.
7. William Bundy, unpublished manuscript (see note 5), pp. 9-13, 14, 15.
8. Taylor's message to the South Vietnamese leadership is contained in *Report on Washington Attitudes*, Taylor Papers, NDUL.
9. An interesting Vietnamese perspective of the Quat period is in Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), chapters 17, 18.
10. William Conrad Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), III, 47-51.
11. John M. Taylor, *General Maxwell Taylor: The Sword and the Pen* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 308.
12. Gibbons, III, 67.
13. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War* (San Francisco: Presidio, 1988), pp. 336-42.
14. *Pentagon Papers*, III, 335.
15. Memorandum to President Johnson, 6 March 1965. See Gibbons, III, 153, especially note 67.
16. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 125.
17. Memorandum to the President, 31 March 1965. NSC History, Deployment of Major Forces to Vietnam, Vol. II, LBJ Library.
18. Cables, American Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 5 p.m. and 8 p.m., 14 April 1965. Cited in Gibbons, III, 226-27.
19. Memorandum for the President, 14 April 1965. Cited in Gibbons, III, 228.
20. Gibbons, III, 228.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-30.
22. Diary entry, 18-22 April 1965, Taylor Papers, NDUL.
23. Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), pp. 64-65.
24. Cyrus Vance, Cable to McNamara 172042Z, 17 July 1965, cited in John Burke and Fred Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), pp. 214-15. Westmoreland's comment is in *A Soldier Reports*, p. 143. There is some doubt, however, whether LBJ had really made up his mind yet or not. This is discussed with additional documentation in notes on page 215 of Burke and Greenstein.