

Larry Berman

PLANNING A TRAGEDY

**The Americanization
of the War in Vietnam**



Copyright © 1982 by Larry Berman

All rights reserved.

Published simultaneously in Canada by
Penguin Books Canada Ltd,
2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario L3R 1B4.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Berman, Larry.

Planning a tragedy.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-1975—United States.
2. United States—Politics and government—1963-1969.
3. Political science—Decision making. I. Title.

DS558.B47 1982 . 950.704'3 81-22570

ISBN 0-393-95326-2 AACR2

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110

W. W. Norton & Company, Ltd. 37 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3NU

7 8 9 0

holding on and avoiding, for psychological and morale reasons, a spectacular defeat of South Vietnamese or U.S. forces. All suspect that the recent Viet Cong lull is but the quiet before the storm.^{81*}

Bundy's prediction about bringing Ambassador Taylor on board was an accurate one, evidenced by Bundy's post-Honolulu memo to the president: "Max Taylor has made one reservation to Bob McNamara's statement of his views in Bob's memorandum of April 21, and I think you ought to know about it. . . . In essence, Max says that he thinks we can get a favorable settlement in a matter of months rather than in 'perhaps a year or two,' if we keep up our bombing and introduce substantial US and third-country forces."⁸³

Despite George Ball's warning to the president that a "150 percent increase in our troop deployment in South Vietnam would multiply our dangers and responsibilities while limiting our freedom of maneuver,"⁸⁴ the Honolulu consensus was accepted by the president.†

By now, however, there was even doubt within the intelligence community that the Honolulu numbers would be sufficient. An April 30 report from the CIA Office of National Estimates confirmed that "the general outlook remains dreary and in some respects the dangers of the situation have increased." The report focused on the impending VC summer offensive and its effect on the political stability of Saigon:

Within South Vietnam governmental weakness and the possibility of military coups will continue. Although a greatly enlarged U.S. presence

*According to Admiral Sharp, "The foregoing is, in fact, a distortion of the view I took at that conference. However, as with most conferences that Secretary McNamara attended, the published results somehow tended to reflect his own views, not necessarily a consensus."⁸²

†During the last week of April and the first week of May, President Johnson's attention focused almost exclusively on events in the Dominican Republic. On April 24 rebel forces overthrew the ruling military junta, beginning two weeks of civil war in Santo Domingo. President Johnson, believing that the rebels (led by ex-President Juan Bosch) had been infiltrated by Communists, dispatched approximately 21,000 U.S. Marines to the Dominican Republic. The president's action was supported by the American public, and Johnson's success in the Caribbean probably shaded his expectation that the public would support similar moves against another Communist aggressor in Vietnam.

and involvement has thus far boosted South Vietnamese morale and combativeness, this will continue only if our efforts are demonstrably effective. There will be constant danger that the war weary people of South Vietnam will let the U.S. assume an even greater share of the fighting. There will also be danger that increased U.S. troop commitment will lead more South Vietnamese to accept the Communist line that U.S. colonialism is replacing French. This could turn increasing numbers of Vietnamese toward support of the Viet Cong effort to oust the U.S. . . . The Vietnam situation thus appears to be entering a critical phase. If, during the next few months, the Viet Cong can pull off one or more spectacular military victories, or if defeatism increases substantially in South Vietnam or if the political situation again deteriorates, the Communist effort in Vietnam would gain great momentum. If, on the other hand, a major Viet Cong military effort this summer is generally repulsed, the Viet Cong position would suffer substantially, with a corresponding increase in GVN morale and popular support. It is of course possible, though we believe it unlikely, that the Viet Cong will avoid a major engagement this summer because of supply difficulties and a desire to increase their build-up for combat at a later date.⁸⁵

In May, Secretary Rusk requested an assessment of probable DRV/VC activities during the summer. Taylor cabled Rusk that Rolling Thunder had not weakened the DRV's "determination to continue directing and supporting Viet Cong and seeking further intensification of war in the South." In South Vietnam the "political situation is still basically unstable" and open to Communist manipulation. According to Taylor, "Vietnamese Communists have shown themselves to be a tough enemy, both physically and morally, and it is likely that they interpret our apparent reliance on air power and the restricted employment of U.S. ground forces and statements of certain U.S. leaders as indicating pretty clearly we are reluctant to engage in ground war."⁸⁶

But the United States would not look reluctant for very long. On June 3 Ambassador Taylor cabled Secretary Rusk with a shocking perspective on the military and political situation.⁸⁷ No amount of bombing the North would cause Hanoi to give up the insurgency in the South. "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