

IV.C Evolution of the War (26 Vols.)

Direct Action: The Johnson Commitments, 1964-1968
(16 Vols.)

4. Marine Combat Units Go to DaNang, March 1965

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IV. C. 4.

EVOLUTION OF THE WAR
MARINE COMBAT UNITS GO TO DA NANG
MARCH 1965

SUMMARY

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MARINE COMBAT UNITS GO TO DA NANG -- MARCH 1965

SUMMARY

On March 8, 1965, two United States Marine Corps Battalion Landing Teams arrived at Da Nang with the Mission to help secure the air base and associated installations. What was the rationale behind the decision to put the first U.S. ground combat units into Vietnam? Was this a conscious prelude to U.S. assumption of a ground combat role in the Vietnam war?

On February 22, 1965, COMUSMACV, General Westmoreland, recommended the landing and the mission. The United States at the time was already conducting Flaming Dart airstrikes against the DRV. Since Da Nang was supporting those strikes in addition to concomitant air activity within SVN, there was concern in many quarters that Da Nang might suffer the same fate as had Bien Hoa the previous November. Ambassador Taylor supported Westmoreland's request for the Marines, but with serious reservations. He saw this deployment as the removal of the last barrier to U.S. assumption of the ground war. In addition, he argued that two Marine BLTs would not be able to guarantee base security and that "white-faced" troops would be unable to assimilate and would have great difficulty identifying the enemy. ^{a/} There is no documentary evidence to indicate that any of the other decision-making principals shared Ambassador Taylor's reservations.

Approval to send the Marines, contingent on GVN concurrence, came on February 26, 1965, and, except for an abortive attempt by the Defense Department to substitute Army airborne troops for the Marines at the last minute, all progressed smoothly through the landing of the Marines and the preparation of their defensive positions.

Estimates of the political/military situation in SVN in early 1965, both from the official viewpoint and from other observers, were universally gloomy. No one foresaw ultimate US/GVN victory without reversal of the then-current trend. The GVN was seen to be well on its way to complete collapse. The most optimistic estimate was that the VC would take over within a year.

Prior to the request for Marines, the principal advisors to the President had, for some time, been debating possible U.S. courses of action in SVN. The possible use of ground forces for security and as deterrent or reaction forces against possible DRV/CPR ground action in SEA was included in these discussions, and indeed both CINCPAC and COMUSMACV had prepared detailed contingency plans in expectation of a decision to so employ ground forces. However, no plan to engage U.S. ground forces in offensive action against the Viet Cong had been considered. From the documentary record, it appears that the U.S. offensive

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role was to be limited to airpower. On February 7, 1965, for example, McGeorge Bundy sent to the President a memorandum which outlined the policy of graduated reprisal airstrikes against the DRV. There is no reference in that memorandum to the use of ground troops in SVN, despite the fact that it was a major document outlining what was to become U.S. strategy.

While it appears as though all the principals in the decision-making process, including Ambassador Taylor and CINCPAC, chose to view the Marine deployment as an isolated phenomenon rather than as part of a sequence, there is evidence to indicate that COMUSMACV saw it as the first step presaging a U.S. ground force build-up in SEA. A fair proportion of the newspaper writers at the time were equally prescient.

Regardless of what was said or believed at the time the Marines were landed, it was obvious to them from the outset that they had neither the capability nor the flexibility to adequately secure the airbase at Da Nang, and they believed that the restrictions placed on them were ill-considered.

a/

Back in August 1964, when he was less well-acquainted with the Vietnamese war and the proclivities of the side we were supporting, Ambassador Taylor was more readily inclined to recommend prudent actions involving the deployment of U.S. ground forces to Vietnam. He is on record in Embtel 465 of 18 August 1964, as being in favor of "taking such visible measures as introducing U.S. HAWK units to Da Nang and Saigon, [and] landing a Marine Force at Da Nang for defense of the airfield and beefing up MACV's support base...."

There is no agonizing over "white-faced" soldiers and their difficulties in Embtel 465. The cable contains the discussion of two specific courses of action, labeled appropriately A and B, aimed at increasing the pressure on North Vietnam through the use of American air and naval power primarily. Course of Action A presumed that the government of General Nguyen Khanh would respond to the input of increased American assistance, get itself organized and make enough military progress to "free Saigon from the VC threat which presently rings it and assure that sufficient GVN ground forces will be available to provide a reasonable measure of defense against any DRV ground reaction which may develop in the execution of our program and thus avoid the possible requirement for a major U.S. ground force commitment." Course of Action B was based upon the inability of Khanh government to overcome its difficulties or make any significant military progress in the South. Course of Action B presumed that the U.S. would go ahead with its program to increase pressure on the DRV notwithstanding; "however, it increases the likelihood of U.S. involvement in ground action, since Khanh will

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have almost no available ground forces which can be released from pacification employment to mobile resistance of DRV attacks."

In anticipation of having to proceed with Course of Action B, Taylor recommended "raising the level of precautionary military readiness" by deploying forces as described above. He did not address the involvement of U.S. ground forces in the war against the insurgents in the South, but rather was concerned with the possibility of provoked DRV aggression from the North, and the necessity to counter it if it occurred.

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DECISION STUDY: MARINE COMBAT UNITS GO TO DA NANG: MARCH 1965

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<u>DATE</u>	<u>EVENT OR DOCUMENT</u>	<u>DESCRIPTION</u>
18 Aug 64	EMBTEL 465	In a discussion of proposed U.S. air and naval action to increase pressure on North Vietnam, Taylor told State that as a hedge against the failure of the GVN to do its part, the U.S. "should raise the level of precautionary military readiness (if not already done) by taking such visible measures as introducing U.S. Hawk units to Da Nang and Saigon, [and] landing a Marine force at Da Nang for defense of the airfield and beefing up MACV's support base...."
1 Oct 64	SNIE	The National Intelligence Board expected the political situation in South Vietnam to continue to decay, the war effort gradually peter out and the Vietcong to seek a neutralist coalition which they could easily dominate. Two latent strengths of the GVN were cited: the endurance of the people and the ability of administrators to carry out routine tasks without guidance from Saigon.
3 Nov 64	William Bundy Memorandum for the NSC Working Group	Convening a new group on Southeast Asia, Bundy mentioned three courses of action open to the U.S. in Vietnam -- none of which involved the use of U.S. ground troops except in response to overt CHICOM/DRV attacks as called for by CINCPAC OPLANS 32-64 and 39-65.
13 Nov 64	Draft Memorandum	William Bundy said he did "not envisage the introduction of substantial ground forces into South Vietnam or Thailand in conjunction with these initial actions" -- the three courses of action then under study. The use of U.S. ground troops for base security was not mentioned although sending a multi-lateral force to northern SVN was suggested.
23 Nov 64	JCSM 982-64	This first JCS proposal for sending U.S. ground troops to Vietnam suggested Marines go to Da Nang, other ground troops to Tan Son Nhut Airbase for security and deterrence.

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30 Nov 64	"Alternatives to Air Actions on North Vietnam"	(State Dept) A proposal to use ground troops "in support of diplomacy": deploy them to prove U.S. resolve, then launch a major diplomatic offensive. This paper was considered by the NSC Working Group, but went no further.
1 Dec 64	Presidential Decision	President Johnson approved the recommendation of Ambassador Taylor and NSC principals to implement the Working Group's "Course of Action A"; after about a month and after GVN progress in certain areas, Course C -- a program "principally of progressively more serious air strikes" against NVN would be initiated. Again, ground troop commitment was not discussed.
1 Jan 65	OPLAN 32-64	The "alert" or first phase of the plan in effect. (MACV Command History shows planning had begun for the dispatch of U.S. ground troops into South Vietnam in connection with this and other contingency plans.)
Jan and Feb 1965	MACV Monthly Evaluation Reports; CIA Situation Reports	General Westmoreland said recently initiated "Flaming Dart" air campaign against the North was beneficial for morale in South Vietnam. He called GVN social and political institutions "remarkably intact" despite the "disintegrating blows" of political upheaval. (Huong's government fell in January; Premier Quat's regime was shaky.) But enemy gains continued. The Viet Cong struck Pleiku and other bases in early February; 12 battalions (6000 men) had reportedly moved into the I Corps. Westmoreland hoped air attacks in North and South Vietnam would be enough to reverse the trend. CIA assessments were more pessimistic. In February Binh Dinh Province was said to be just about lost to the enemy. Intelligence indicated the Viet Cong might try to take Kontum Province and split the GVN through II Corps during the rainy season.

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7 Feb 65	McGeorge Bundy Memorandum for the President	<p>Bundy felt the GVN would collapse by 1966 without substantially more U.S. help and action. To avert collapse and to counter latent anti-Americanism and the growing feeling among Vietnamese that U.S. was going to quit, Bundy recommended a policy of graduated, continuing air strikes against North Vietnam. He did not mention a base security problem; he did not suggest deployment of U.S. ground troops -- then or in the future.</p> <p>(This document -- and the absence of others -- supports the interpretation that the forthcoming Marine deployment to Da Nang was intended as a one-shot response to a particularly serious security problem, not as the first in a planned series of U.S. troop commitments.)</p>
7 Feb 65	McNamara News Conference	<p>The Secretary announced elements of a USMC HAWK missile battalion would be deployed to Da Nang to improve security against air attack.</p>
11 Feb 65	JCSM 100-65	<p>A proposal for the first eight weeks of military action against North Vietnam. As expected, air strikes were paramount but the JCS recommended collateral deployment of a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) to Da Nang and an Army brigade to Thailand -- not for counter-insurgency duties but to deter overt DRV/CHICOM retaliation to the air strikes, to improve U.S. ability to respond if retaliatory attacks were launched.</p>
18 Feb 65	SNIE	<p>A new ingredient in the still critical situation in South Vietnam was to be the inauguration of the Rolling Thunder air campaign. This evaluation showed Viet Cong attacks against U.S. bases would probably continue at about their present level of intensity despite increased air action against North Vietnam.</p>

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22 Feb 65	MACV Msg to CINCPAC 220743Z	General Throckmorton, Deputy COMUSMACV, visited Da Nang, called the situation grave, and doubted ARVN's ability to provide adequate security. Throckmorton recommended that the entire 9th MEB be sent to Da Nang, but General Westmoreland cut this to two Battalion Landing Teams (BLTs) with a third to be held off-shore in reserve. The troops were to assist GVN forces in guarding Da Nang against enemy ground attacks.
22 Feb 65	EMBTEL 2699	<p>Ambassador Taylor voiced several strong reservations to the idea of sending Marines to Da Nang:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">-- It reversed a long-standing policy of avoiding commitment of ground combat forces in SVN. Taylor was sure the GVN would "seek to unload other ground force tasks upon us"; he was sure this deployment would invite requests for more troops to meet additional and ultimately defensive offensive requirements.-- Two BLTs would not release significant numbers of ARVN for mobile operations against the Viet Cong; the Marines would simply be performing static defense tasks inadequately done by ARVN in the past.-- Anticipating that using U.S. troops for active operations would grow more attractive, Taylor warned against it. The "white-faced" soldier cannot be assimilated by the population, he cannot distinguish between friendly and unfriendly Vietnamese; the Marines are not armed, trained or equipped for jungle guerrilla warfare. Taylor prophesied that the U.S. -- like France -- would fail to adapt to such condition.-- Two BLTs could help but could not make Da Nang secure. The entire MEB might significantly improve things, but no force could prevent surprise mortar attacks, a favorite VC tactic.

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		However, because Westmoreland was so concerned about Da Nang's safety and because Taylor felt security was a legitimate mission for U.S. troops, although he objected to it, the Ambassador would support MACV's recommendation for one BLT. He suggested GVN approval be sought prior to the Marine deployment.
22 Feb 65	MACV Message to JCS	Claimed the Marine deployment to Da Nang would free four Regional Force companies, one tank platoon and another RF battalion then being formed for active anti-VC operations. (The March MACV Evaluation Report showed only two RF companies had been released.)
24 Feb 65	CINCPAC Message to JCS	Recommended immediate deployment of two BLTs; recommended one squadron of F-4s be sent to Da Nang for close air support of the troops and "for other missions along with the primary mission." The tone was urgent: deploy now "before the tragedy" of a Viet Cong attack. CINCPAC disagreed with Taylor; called attention to the Marine Corps' distinguished record in counterinsurgency operations; claimed U.S. presence would free ARVN for mobile patrol operations and make Da Nang a tougher target for enemy forces.
24 Feb 65	JCSM 130-65	Forwarded and supported CINCPAC's recommendations.
26 Feb 65	DEPTEL 1840	Approved the deployment; said the Marines were on their way and instructed Taylor to secure GVN approval.
28 Feb 65	EMBTEL 2789	Taylor agreed to seek GVN concurrence to the deployment -- and planned an approach designed to stress U.S. reluctance to deploy any men even temporarily, emphasize the limited mission of the Marines and discourage GVN hopes for further commitments. Taylor would open by

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		discussing the severe security problem at Da Nang and USG concern about it. Although he wished more GVN battalions could be sent there, Taylor would say he knew ARVN troops were chronically short in I Corps and he knew any redeployment would impose prohibitive costs to security in other areas. Thus, he would say "the USG has been driven to consider a solution which we have always rejected in the past: the introduction of U.S. ground combat forces to reinforce the defense of Da Nang until GVN forces become available for the purpose."
1 Mar 65	CJCS Letter to SecDef (forwarding JSOP-70)	General Wheeler said the JCS were addressing Southeast Asia force levels separately because that was a "specific problem area" requiring a "near term and long term solution." This suggests the JCS probably had been considering deployment of U.S. troops to Vietnam -- perhaps for active operations -- before the Marine deployment to Da Nang.
2 Mar 65	DOD Tel 6166	ASD(ISA) McNaughton cabled Taylor that the 173d Airborne Brigade (then on Okinawa) would be deployed to Da Nang instead of the Marines. (This last minute change may have been Mr. McNaughton's attempt to emphasize the limited, temporary nature of the U.S. troop deployment and to reduce the conspicuousness of the U.S. presence. Airborne troops carry less equipment and look less formidable than the Marines plus they have no history of peace-keeping intervention in foreign wars.)
2 Mar 65	EMBTEL 1954	Taylor and Westmoreland -- who argued that the Marines were more self-sustaining than the airborne -- objected to the proposed substitution of Army airborne for Marine troops.
3 Mar 65	CINCPAC Message to JCS 030230Z	CINCPAC strongly objected to Mr. McNaughton's proposal. It denied him the only airborne assault force in the theater and, more

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		importantly, completely upset his contingency plans for combat operations in Southeast Asia. CINCPAC said that since 1959 when OPLAN-32 was approved, the Marines had been scheduled for deployment to Da Nang; seven CINCPAC and SEATO contingency plans plus many supporting plans rested on this. All the preparations had been made for the landing of the BLTs -- and some forces were already embarked. CINCPAC concluded: "The situation in Southeast Asia has now reached a point where the soundness of our contingency planning may be about to be tested." Some 1300 Marines were then in Da Nang; tasking of new forces had been completed; logistics, communications, command arrangements had been set. It would be "imprudent to shift forces in a major sector and to force changes in U.S. contingency posture for other parts of Southeast Asia." (The McNaughton proposal was killed.)
3 Mar 65	DEPTEL 1876	State requested Taylor's views on the possible use of an international force in Vietnam.
3 Mar 65	EMBTELS 2014 and 3112	Taylor first reported the views of the Australian envoy to the GVN on a multilateral force -- views which Taylor supported. It would heighten Vietnamese xenophobia; it might cause the GVN to "shuck off greater responsibility onto the USG." In his second message Taylor said he had no idea what the GVN attitude toward a MLF might be, said many problems were involved which had yet to be faced. (The MLF was just a concept at the time -- but Taylor readily looked beyond immediate tactical needs to the long-term ramifications of such a move just as he had in evaluating the proposal to deploy Marines to Da Nang.)
4 Mar 65	JCSM 100-65	The proposal for an eight-week air strike program (and possible deployment of some ground troops) was resubmitted to the

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		Secretary. Again, the use of U.S. troops for active anti-insurgent operations was not mentioned.
5 Mar 65	CINCPAC Eyes Only Message to Wheeler	This said the 9th MEB was needed as soon as possible for base security, to boost the GVN war against the Viet Cong, to provide insurance in case the GVN was unable to resist collapse in the critical Da Nang area where so much was already committed. CINCPAC said the "single most important thing we can do quickly to improve the security situation in South Vietnam is to make full use of our air power."
6 Mar 65	OSD(PA) News Release	Announced two USMC Battalion Landing Teams -- 3500 men -- were being deployed to Vietnam on a limited mission: to provide base security and relieve GVN forces for pacification and offensive operations against the Viet Cong.
6 Mar 65	JCS Message to CINCPAC	Ordered the BLTs to commence landing.
7 Mar 65	Statement by Secretary of State to National TV Audience	Secretary Rusk said the Marines would shoot back if shot at, but their mission was to put a tight security ring around Da Nang -- not to kill Viet Cong.
11 Mar 65	"Estimate of the Situation in SVN" Saigon Airgram to State	The Mission Council reported insurgency would grow unless "...NVN support is checked, GVN military and paramilitary resources increased, pacification goals and concepts refined, administrative efficiency improved and an adequate political-psychological base created.... Only U.S. resources can provide the pressures on NVN necessary to check Hanoi's support although some measure of GVN armed forces participation will be required for psychological reasons; the other measures and programs required to stem the tide...are largely internal to SVN but even here success will require a marked increase in U.S. support and participation."

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14 Mar 65	General Harold Johnson's "Report on Trip to South Vietnam"	<p>General Johnson, in SVN from 5-12 March, was as impressed by the gravity of the situation -- particularly in I Corps -- as were Saigon officials. He submitted several proposals -- including deployment of additional U.S. ground troops -- for attaining U.S. objectives (persuade NVN to abandon support and direction of the insurgency, defeat the insurgents, create a stable GVN). He said more U.S. action was necessary because "what the situation requires may exceed what the Vietnamese can be expected to do."</p> <p>To release ARVN for offensive action, General Johnson proposed sending a U.S. division either to the Bien Hoa/Tan Son Nhut area plus some coastal enclaves or to Kontum, Pleiku and Darlac Provinces in the highlands. Both General Johnson and Mr. McNamara preferred the second alternative -- but McNamara found neither efficient in terms of ARVN released per U.S. input and he also favored a ROK division rather than U.S. troops.</p> <p>General Johnson recommended the SEATO Treaty be invoked and a four-division MLF be deployed across the DMZ "from the South China Sea to the Mekong River" to counter infiltration.</p> <p>Finally he said to evaluate MACV's requests properly a policy decision "must be made now to determine what the Vietnamese should be expected to do for themselves and how much more the U.S. must contribute directly to the security of South Vietnam." Mr. McNamara noted in the margin: "Policy is: anything that will strengthen the position of the GVN will be sent...."</p>
20 Mar 65	JCSM 204-65	<p>The JCS proposed that U.S. troops be deployed to South Vietnam for active operations against the Viet Cong.</p>

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27 Mar 65	MACV Message to CINCPAC	Westmoreland submitted his estimate of the situation and his request for U.S. troops for offensive action against the Viet Cong. Preparation of both estimate and troop input recommendation had begun on 13 March (five days after the Marines arrived; one day after General Johnson completed his trip).
6 Apr 65	NSAM 328	President Johnson approved General Johnson's specific proposals for more U.S. action. This meant more U.S. involvement in terms of money, ships, aircraft, materiel and advisors, but deployment of ground combat units of division size was not approved at this time (2 additional Marine BLTs were approved).

I. INTRODUCTION

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I. Introduction

MARINE COMBAT UNITS GO TO DA NANG -- MARCH 1965

At approximately nine o'clock on the morning of 8 March 1965, the United States Marine Corps' Battalion Landing Team 3/9 splashed ashore at Da Nang on the mainland of Southeast Asia. Although there were already over 20,000 American servicemen in Vietnam, this was the first time that U.S. ground combat units had been committed to action. The mission assigned 3/9 and its companion battalion 1/3 (which landed by air later the same day) was "to occupy and defend critical terrain features in order to secure the airfield and, as directed, communications facilities, U.S. supporting installations, port facilities, landing beaches and other U.S. installations against attack. The U.S. Marine Force will not, repeat will not, engage in day to day actions against the Viet Cong." 1/ The overall responsibility for the security of that base complex was to remain within the purview of the ARVN Commander of the I Corps Tactical Zone, General Nguyen Chanh Thi. It was hoped that with the provision of reinforcements for Da Nang security, General Thi would be able to release some of his own troops from that mission to undertake offensive action against the Viet Cong. 2/ In light of subsequent events, it would be facile to conclude that the modest input of some 3,500 Marines at this juncture presaged the massive buildup of U.S. fighting power in Vietnam which brought American military strength in country to over 180,000 by the end of 1965. Except for COMUSMACV who did see it as a first step and welcomed it and Ambassador Taylor who saw it as an unwelcome first step, official Washington regarded the deployment as a one shot affair to meet a specific situation.

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II. The Decision

A. COMUSMACV's Request

On 22 February 1965, after a visit to Da Nang by General Throckmorton, then Deputy COMUSMACV, General Westmoreland cabled CINCPAC requesting two Marine BLT's to assist in protecting the base against Viet Cong raids, sabotage, and mortar attacks. 3/ As a result of his visit, General Throckmorton told General Westmoreland that he questioned the capability of the Vietnamese to protect the base and recommended the deployment of the entire 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. 4/ General Westmoreland concurred with the security evaluation but requested only two of the three BLT's organic to the 9th MEB with the third BLT to be held offshore as a reserve. 5/

B. The Ambassador's Opinion

Ambassador Taylor sent to the State Department on the same day the following cable:

"The ref cable requests CINCPAC, MACV and Ambassador's views as to requirement for force deployments to this area in view of security situation of SVN. General Westmoreland I agree that there is no need to consider deployments to SVN at this time except possibly for protection of airfield at Da Nang.

"As I analyze the pros and cons of placing any considerable number of Marines in Da Nang area beyond those presently assigned, I develop grave reservations as to wisdom and necessity of so doing. Such action would be step in reversing long standing policy of avoiding commitment of ground combat forces in SVN. Once this policy is breached, it will be very difficult to hold line. If Da Nang needs better protection, so do Bien Hoa, Ton Son Nhut, Nha Trang and other key base areas. Once it becomes evident that we are willing assume such new responsibilities, one may be sure that GVN will seek to unload other ground force tasks upon us. Increased numbers of ground forces in SVN will increase points of friction with local population and create conflicts with RVNAF over command relationships. These disadvantages can be accepted only if there is clear and unchallenged need which can be satisfied only by US ground forces. Turning to possible uses for additional Marines in Da Nang area, I can see several which are worth examining. First, they could be used to reinforce protection of Da Nang airbase against Bien Hoa-type of attack by fire or against combined VC fire and ground attack.

"More ambitious mission would be readiness to engage in mobile operations against VC in Da Nang area to keep VC units at distance from base and make positive contribution to pacification of area. Such US forces would concurrently be available to join in conventional defense of area if DRV army moved southward in resumption of formal hostilities.

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"In defense of the Da Nang airbase against surprise attack by fire, it would be necessary for Marines to be in place on ground in considerable strength. (MACV has estimated that about six battalions would be necessary to keep 81mm mortar fire off large airfield.) Even if whole MEB were deployed, they could not provide complete assurance that surprise mortar fire by small groups attacking at night would be kept off field. Protection of field against VC ground attack would be considerably simpler and would require fewer Marines. It is hard to imagine an attack on field by more than VC regiment and even an attack in those numbers would be extremely risky in face of superior friendly air and ground fire. To meet such an attack, battalion of Marines supported by local ARVN forces should be sufficient. On other hand, as indicated above, effective perimeter defense against mortar fire would require at least whole brigade of Marines.

"It has been suggested that an ancillary benefit to deployment of additional Marines to Da Nang would be freeing of ARVN units for use elsewhere in mobile operations. While some ARVN troops of order of battalion might be so relieved, number would not be sufficient to constitute strong argument for bringing in Marines. Generally speaking, Marines would be performing task which has not been done adequately in past.

"The use of Marines in mobile counter-VC operations has the attraction of giving them an offensive mission and one of far greater appeal than that of mere static defense. However, it would raise many serious problems which in past have appeared sufficiently formidable to lead to rejection of use of US ground troops in a counter-guerrilla role. White-faced soldier armed, equipped and trained as he is not suitable guerrilla fighter for Asian forests and jungles. French tried to adapt their forces to this mission and failed; I doubt that US forces could do much better. Furthermore, we would have vastly complicating factor of not running war and hence problem of arranging satisfactory command relationships with our Vietnamese allies. Finally, there would be ever present question of how foreign soldier would distinguish between a VC and friendly Vietnamese farmer. When I view this array of difficulties, I am convinced that we should adhere to our past policy of keeping our ground forces out of direct counterinsurgency role.

"If there were any great likelihood of DRV forces crossing the Demilitarized Zone in conventional attack, there would be no question of need for strong US Ground force to assist ARVN in defense of coastal plain. However, this situation would not arise suddenly and we should have ample time to make our deployments before situation got out of hand.

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"In view of foregoing considerations, I conclude that only mission worth considering now for additional Marines in Da Nang area is to contribute to defense of base against mortar fire and ground attack. However, to defend against fire would require at least full brigade and I do not believe threat and possible consequences of mortar attack are so great as to warrant pinning down so valuable force in static defensive mission. However, in view of General Westmoreland's understandable concern for safety of this important base, I would be willing to recommend placing in Da Nang Marine battalion landing team. Such force would strengthen defense of base and, at same time, would be manageable force from point of view of accommodating it on base and absorbing it into Da Nang community. Such force with those Marines already present should remove any substantial danger of VC ground attack and in conjunction with available ARVN forces provide an acceptable level of security against attack by fire.

"If Washington decision is to introduce additional Marines into Vietnam, it should, of course, be made contingent upon getting concurrence of GVN. It would be useful and, I believe, not difficult to get GVN to initiate request for additional forces to which USG could then accede. Taylor." 6/

C. CINCPAC's Support

CINCPAC cabled the JCS on 24 February and recommended immediate deployment of two Marine BLT's, one over the beach and one by air and surface. He advised, in addition, that a squadron of Marine F4's be deployed to Da Nang simultaneously. Those aircraft would be for close air support of the defenders and could be used "for other missions along with primary mission. . . . All CINCPAC contingency plans for SEA provide for employment of Marine aircraft from Da Nang." The tone of CINCPAC's cable was urgent. He encouraged deployment now "before the tragedy," and he added that were the base to be attacked before the BLT's were put ashore, the landing force afloat would be unable, because of the time required to get forces to the scene, to influence the outcome. One of the references cited in this lengthy CINCPAC cable was the Ambassador's message of 22 February. In addressing that reference, CINCPAC disagreed openly with Ambassador Taylor and cited the Marine's "distinguished record," saying:

"In ref F the Ambassador discusses the pros and cons of deploying the MEB to Da Nang. The Ambassador comments on the difficulty of providing complete assurance of security from surprise mortar fire even with the whole of MEB. This is true and consequently, what we are obliged to do here is to reduce within the limits of our capability the hazards to our people. I believe that the vulnerability

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of the U.S. investment in Da Nang is as apparent to the VC/DRV as it is to us. With a strong mobile force in the area providing a tight defense of the airfield complex and good security of U.S. outlying installations, I believe that two ancillary benefits will emerge. First, the RVNAF will be encouraged to use the forces thus freed for patrol and security operations, and second, the VC/DRV will be obliged to regard Da Nang as a tougher target. Finally, the Ambassador rejects the usefulness of U.S. ground elements in a counter-guerrilla war because of our color, armament, equipment and training. This stands athwart past performance in this function. The Marines have a distinguished record in counter-guerrilla warfare." 7/

The JCS forwarded to the Secretary of Defense the substance of CINCPAC's recommendations in JCSM-130-65. 8/

D. Contingent Approval

On 26 February the State Department cabled Ambassador Taylor that the Marines were on the way, and that he was to secure approval from the Government of Vietnam for their deployment to Da Nang. 9/ Ambassador Taylor cabled the State Department in reply on 28 February and said:

"After discussion of Ref A with Johnson and Throckmorton (Westmoreland was temporarily unavailable), we have decided to proceed as following.

"I shall seek an appointment with Quat at first opportunity (probably tomorrow March 1) and raise the matter of our concern (but not alarm) over the security of the Da Nang airfield and environs along following lines. It is the most important military installation in the country which is indispensable in air defense and in support of air and sea operations against the DRV. It must be at or near the top of the target list which the VC/DRV wish to destroy. I visited Da Nang on February 27 for the first time in several months and am deeply impressed with the increasing magnitude of the security problem as are General Westmoreland and his principal military colleagues.

"Except for the chronic shortage of GVN forces in I Corps, we would be inclined to urge GVN to allocate several additional battalions to the Da Nang area. But we know that such forces could not be made available except as prohibitive cost to the security of other areas in SVN. For these reasons, we are driven to consider a solution which we have always rejected in the past, the introduction of US ground combat forces to reinforce the defense of Da Nang until GVN forces become available for the purpose. In spite of many

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cogent reasons against this solution. General Westmoreland and I are now reluctantly prepared to recommend it to Washington if the PM so desires and requests.

"Quat may agree at once but is likely to want to take time to discuss the matter with Thieu and Minh. Even if he should acquiesce, I would suggest another meeting on the subject with Quat, Thieu, Minh and Thi at which Westmoreland and I would emphasize the limited mission of the Marines and their non-involvement in pacification.

"If all goes well and concurrence is received, there should be no problem about a press release. We would envision this to be a short, joint GVN/US statement issued at once to the effect that, at the request of GVN, the USG is landing two battalions of Marines to strengthen the security of the Da Nang area until such time as they can be relieved by GVN forces. The first BLT could then land at once and the second on call from MACV.

"I strongly urge a deferment of decision on landing in remainder of MEB until the first two BLT's are ashore and in place. By that time we will have around 7300 U.S. military personnel in the Da Nang area and I doubt ability to absorb or usefully employ the rest of the MEB. We can tell better after the two BLT's are shaken down. Taylor." 10/

In a subsequent meeting with GVN officials, Ambassador Taylor secured their approval for the deployment. Generals Thieu and "Little" Minh expressed their concern about the possible reaction of the populace in the Da Nang area and asked that the Marines be "brought ashore in the most inconspicuous way feasible." 11/

E. Eleventh Hour Change

One final obstacle to the Marine deployment was raised when Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton cabled the Ambassador in Saigon on 2 March stating that the 173rd Airborne Brigade, then stationed on Okinawa, would be substituted for the Marines. 12/ Other than exchange of cables, there is no documentary evidence in the files to indicate what might have been the rationale behind the belated attempt to deploy the 173rd Airborne to Da Nang in place of the Marines. One can only surmise the reasons behind such a move, but certain characteristics of the two forces may provide a clue. The Marines present prima facie a more formidable appearance upon arrival on the scene. They have organic a complement of heavy weapons, amphibious vehicles, and various other items of weighty hardware, including tanks, in contrast to the smaller and lighter airborne. Together with their accompanying armada of ships, the Marines might be seen as a more permanent force than the airborne. This, coupled with the common knowledge that the Marines have a long history of interventions in foreign countries for purposes of peacekeeping and stability, might have influenced someone in the decision apparatus to consider using the airborne in their

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stead as a positive signal that the Da Nang deployment was to be of short duration. If this was indeed the case, it suggests that there were still high-ranking people in Washington who were hoping to make the deployment of U.S. troops temporary and limited.

General Westmoreland objected to the proposed change on the grounds that the Marines were more self-sustaining and the Ambassador agreed with him. 13/ CINCPAC, in objecting to the proposed change, sent the following telegram to the JCS:

"The action outlined in Ref A, which would place the 173rd Airborne Brigade, a two-battalion brigade, at Da Nang, embodies several features which are undesirable. A light and flexible airborne force would be committed to a fixed task depriving CINCPAC of his air mobile reserve. It is the only airborne assault force in the theater. A comprehensive array of plans and logistic preparations which affect many of our forces, and the forces of other countries, would be undermined. The action would employ units which are less adequately constituted for the purpose.

"Since the origination of OPLAN 32 in 1959, the Marines have been scheduled for deployment to Da Nang. Seven CINCPAC and SEATO contingency plans and a myriad of supporting plans at lower echelons reflect this same deployment. As a result, there has been extensive planning, reconnaissance, and logistics preparation over the years. The CG, 9th MEB is presently in Da Nang finalizing the details of landing the MEB forces in such a way as to cause minimum impact on the civilian populace. The forces are present and ready to land, some now embarked, with plans for execution complete. The deployment has been thoroughly explored by Amb Taylor with Prime Minister Quat and the method in which the Marines would be introduced was mutually agreed upon as pointed out in Ref B.

"Another practical consideration is the fact that 1300 Marines are already at Da Nang. The Marines have been there in varying numbers for more than two years and thus have long since established the logistics and administrative base for future Marine deployments. They have a long standing and effective local relationship with the populace and the RVNAF. Then, there is the matter of adaptability for the task. Da Nang is on the sea coast. Each Marine BLT has its own amphibian vehicles, which are adaptable to continuing seaborne supply. Each one has a trained shore party to insure the the flow of material across the beach in an area where port facilities are marginal. They embody amphibious bulk fuel systems which serve as a cardinal stand-by in case of interruption of commercial fuel supply. Their communications equipment and procedures are compatible with the hawks, helicopters and other Marine formations now

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in Da Nang and their organic heavy engineer equipment will be effective in developing the defensive works needed for accomplishing the task. The Marine MEB includes tanks and artillery. The airborne battalions, on the other hand, being designed for a different task, are deficient in each of these important particulars -- in varying degrees -- and are thus less desirable for the assignment.

"The situation in Southeast Asia has now reached a point where the soundness of our contingency planning may be about to be tested. The tasking has been completed. Logistic arrangements and lines of communication are establishing and operating. Command arrangements have been made and agreed upon and plans for landing and disposition of forces ashore have been made and these forces are ready to execute them. It therefore seems imprudent, at this time, to shift forces in a major sector and to force changes in contingency posture for other parts of Southeast Asia. [Emphasis added]

"Whatever force is landed, its strength should be adequate for the job. The airborne force, if selected, would require substantial and diverse augmentation to achieve the desired combat capability.

"If the final decision is to deploy and [sic] Army Brigade instead of the MEB to Da Nang, then I would recommend a one Brigade Task Force of the 25th Infantry Division. This would provide a ground combat capability reasonably similar to the ground elements of the MEB. The command and control elements and the initial light infantry elements of this task force could be airlifted to provide some early security at Da Nang. Achievement of a more adequate capability similar to the MEB would require air and sealift from Hawaii and CONUS augmentation of some support units for the task force. The DAFFD should not be used since it is an essential element of other contingency plans.

"I recommend that the MEB be landed at Da Nang as previously planned." 14/

F. Final Approval

The objections were sustained, and on 6 March 1965 the Pentagon issued the following news release:

"TWO U.S. MARINE BATTALIONS TO BE DEPLOYED IN VIET NAM. After consultation between the governments of South Vietnam and the United States, the United States Government has agreed to the request of the Government of Vietnam to station two United States Marine Corps Battalions in the Da Nang area to strengthen the general security of the Da Nang Air Base complex.

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"The limited mission of the Marines will be to relieve Government of South Vietnam forces now engaged in security duties for action in the pacification program and in offensive roles against Communist guerrilla forces." 15/

On the same day the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered CINCPAC to commence the landing of the BLT's, 16/ and on 7 March Secretary of State Rusk told a national television and radio audience that the Marines would shoot back if shot at, but their mission was to put a tight security ring around Da Nang Air Base, thus freeing South Vietnamese forces for combat. 17/

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III. The Situation

A. Da Nang Local

Prior to the landing of the Marines, Da Nang had yet to be attacked by the VC, but the official estimates of enemy intentions and capabilities in the I Corps area were none too encouraging. There were reported to be 12 battalions numbering some 6,000 men within striking distance of the base, and on the night of 7 March the town of Mieu Kong, three miles south of the airfield, had been probed by a VC unit of unknown size. 18/ General Throckmorton's estimate of ARVN lack of capability to prevent Viet Cong depredations against the sizeable and expensive stocks of U.S. equipment on the base was colored, no doubt, by recent Viet Cong attacks at Pleiku and Qui Nhon and by the raid on Bien Hoa airfield on 1 November 1964. In all of these attacks, the GVN security forces had not been able to prevent a determined Viet Cong attempt to penetrate the defenses around important installations. Moreover, it was apparent that U.S. personnel in South Vietnam were vulnerable. With the beginning of the Flaming Dart air strikes against North Vietnam in early February 1965, communist retaliation against the bases which supported those strikes became a distinct probability. In order to cope with possible communist reprisal air attacks on Da Nang, elements of a Marine HAWK Missile Battalion were ordered to that base on 7 February. 19/ However, communist air attacks were less probable and offered higher risk than a ground attack by Viet Cong forces in country, and Da Nang, which was heavily supporting air activity over North and South Vietnam, was a lucrative target. If, as General Westmoreland reported in his February 1965 Monthly Evaluation, the air strikes in North and South Vietnam were having a beneficial effect on morale in the GVN, then it was highly likely that the Viet Cong would at least make an effort to stop or slow down the frequency of the raids. 20/

B. GVN Instability

Both the CIA and MACV were sober and somber in their estimates of the political situation in South Vietnam in early 1965. 21/ The fall of the Huong government in January and the confused events of 16-21 February which culminated in General Khanh's departure from Vietnam made any predictions difficult at best. The CIA thought Quat's government was shaky, 22/ and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a message to General Westmoreland conveyed his fears that despite U.S. actions against North Vietnam, the GVN might collapse. General Westmoreland's reply to the Chairman stated in part:

"History may well record that the real significance of 1964 was not major VC advance and corresponding GVN retrogression but rather that South Vietnam's social and political institutions remained remarkably intact under the powerful disintegrating blows to which subjected -- most of them not of VC making... Nonetheless, we do have the very real asset of a resilient people and this gives hope that there is more time available than we might think; time in which, if properly exploited, the needed national leadership could evolve..." 23/

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CINCPAC added a telling note to General Westmoreland's comments when he said we needed the 9th MEB for insurance should the GVN be unable to resist collapse in the critical area of Da Nang where so much was already committed. 24/

C. Enemy Capabilities

Despite some encouraging signs in January 1965, the official assessments of the military situation emanating from Saigon were bleak. The GVN armed forces had suffered a major defeat at Binh Gia, Phuoc Tuy Province, in late December-early January. There, the Viet Cong, fighting for the first time with coordinated units of regimental size, had stood off the best that ARVN could offer and held their ground. To many observers, including General Westmoreland, Binh Gia signaled the long-expected beginning of Phase III of the insurgency. The Viet Cong were confident enough to abandon their hit-and-run guerrilla tactics and engage the GVN armed forces in conventional ground combat.

Although the rate of Viet Cong activity in January was the lowest in 11 months, it was surmised that they were merely regrouping and planning their next steps. Sure enough, during the month of February the VC reappeared in force and carried out a series of successful raids and attacks, including those on the U.S. installations in Pleiku and Qui Nhon. The CIA in its February Sitrep was prompted to declare that the critical province of Binh Dinh in the II Corps area was just about lost to the Viet Cong. 25/ Binh Dinh is a key province for a number of reasons. Highway 1, the major north-south road artery connecting the I Corps with Saigon, runs the length of Binh Dinh. Of equal importance is Highway 19 which runs west from Qui Nhon through An Khe to the city of Pleiku. Qui Nhon, a coastal city at the eastern end of Highway 19, offers one of the few viable port alternatives to Saigon and is a major logistical base for resupply to the upland bases and camps. Loss of control of Highway 19 dictates that friendly forces in the highlands be resupplied entirely by air -- a staggering prospect. Finally, the large population in Binh Dinh, numbering some 800,000, offers great prospects for manpower and sustenance to the side able to control the province. 26/

Intelligence estimates began stating that the coming rainy season would be accompanied by a major Viet Cong attempt to cut the country in half in the II Corps. It was quite possible that the VC would attempt during such a campaign to seize complete control of one of the highland provinces, most probably Kontum, and would then proceed to set up a NLF government therein. The political and psychological effect of such a move might, some observers feared, sound the death knell for the GVN. General Westmoreland, in his February Monthly Evaluation added plaintively that he hoped the air activity in North and South Vietnam would help reverse the trend. 27/

In October of 1964, the National Intelligence Board in Washington had published a grave picture of the situation in South Vietnam. In

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summary, they said that the political situation would continue to decay with a gradual petering out of the war effort. Coup after coup, intractable Buddhists, Montagnard revolt, and strikes were all evidence of the lack of leadership, and no charismatic leader was in sight. The Viet Cong were unlikely to make an overt bid to seize power as things were going their way, and they were looking for a neutralist coalition which they could easily dominate. The endurance of the people and the ability of the administration to carry on routine duties without any guidance from Saigon were cited as latent strengths as was the fact that no identifiable power group had yet called for an end to the fighting or had sought accommodation with the Viet Cong. 28/

The events of the next few months added no new ingredients to this gloomy picture until the decision to initiate Rolling Thunder. In estimating probable communist reactions to the latter, the National Intelligence Board stated "we accordingly believe that the DRV/VC reaction to a few more air attacks like those of early February would probably be to continue their pressures in the South more or less on the scale of recent weeks... It is possible that they would, for a week or two, refrain from direct attacks on U.S. installations, but we cannot estimate that such restraint is probable." 29/

MacGeorge Bundy in his Memorandum to the President dated 7 February 1965 estimated that without additional U.S. action, the GVN would collapse within the next year. He saw latent anti-Americanism near the surface in South Vietnam and detected amongst the Vietnamese the attitude that the U.S. was going to quit. Bundy recommended the initiation of a policy of gradual and continuing reprisal, but he did not even mention the question of U.S. installation security nor did he mention the possibility of committing U.S. ground forces. 30/

D. Contemporary Accounts

Contemporary accounts of the situation in South Vietnam from the non-official viewpoint are unanimous in their recognition of the continuing decay in the political and military capacity of the GVN to resist. The prospect for success if the U.S. did not change its approach to the war was nil. The Viet Cong were clearly winning. To writers like Halberstam and Mecklin, the choice for the U.S. boiled down to two alternatives; either get out or commit land forces to stem the tide. 31/ Neither of these writers was likely to view the arrival of the Marines as anything else but indication of a decision to take the second course. Shaplen treated the landing of the Marines as an isolated incident, but he did not accept the rationale that they were in Vietnam for strictly defensive reasons. In commenting on the subsequent arrival of more Marines and the concomitant expansion of their mission to include offensive patrol work, he says: "...and sooner or later, it was surmised, they would tangle directly with the Viet Cong; in fact, it was obvious from the outset that in an emergency they would be airlifted to other areas away from their base." 32/

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A glance at some of the commentary of early March 1965 in newspapers and periodicals gives clear indication that the landing of the two Marine BLT's was seen as an event of major significance. Analysis of the import of the event varies, as would be expected, from writer to writer, but almost without exception they read more into the deployment than was made explicit by the brief Defense Department press release. By-lines from Saigon, where reporters had ready access to "reliable sources" in the U.S. Mission, give clear indication that there had been a major shift in attitude as regards the use of U.S. ground forces in Asia. Ted Sell, a Los Angeles Times staff writer, wrote on 10 March 1965. "The landing of the two infantry battalions is in its own way a far more significant act than were earlier attacks by U.S. airplanes, even though those attacks were directed against a country -- North Vietnam -- ostensibly not taking part in the direct war." Speaking after the Marines were ordered in, one high official said of the no-ground-troops-in-Asia shibboleth, "Sure, it's undesirable. But that doesn't mean we won't do it." 33/ It is especially significant that among the writers attempting to gauge the extent of U.S. resolve in the Vietnamese situation, the deployment of ground forces was somehow seen as a much more positive and credible indication of U.S. determination than any of the steps, including the air strikes on the DRV, previously taken.

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IV. The Decision Process

A. Proposals for Actions Before the National Security Council Working Group, Late 1964

Events in the late 1964-early 1965 period moved at such a rapid pace as almost to defy isolated analysis. On 3 November 1964, just two days after the Viet Cong successfully attacked the U.S. air base and billeting at Bien Hoa, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy convened the newly established NSC Working Group on SVN/SEA. Membership in the group included the State Department, OSD/ISA, the JCS, and CIA. 34/ Debate within the group centered around three proposed courses of action, none of which contained a major U.S. ground troop commitment to SVN. 35/ Ground troop commitment was addressed in draft papers circulated within the group by the principals, but it does not appear that anyone was thinking in terms of a major U.S. effort on the ground in counterinsurgency operations. William Bundy's own papers mentioned CINCPAC OPLAN 32-64 and CINCPAC OPLAN 39-65, both of which contingency plans provided for the input of US ground combat forces into SEA in response to Chicom or DRV aggression or a combination of the two. 36/ In a draft dated 13 November 1964, Bundy discussed ground troop commitment and said in part that he did "not envisage the introduction of substantial ground forces into South Vietnam or Thailand in conjunction with these initial actions." 37/ The initial actions to which he referred were the three basic options under consideration at the time by the Working Group. Bundy went on in the same draft memorandum to state that the question of ground troop involvement needed further consideration, including the possibility of the introduction of a multilateral force into the northern provinces of South Vietnam. In discussing the pros and cons of ground troops, Bundy did not mention the security of bases but he did suggest that the presence of troops in South Vietnam might invite Viet Cong activity against them.

Other drafts circulated in the NSC Working Group dealt with ground forces. In a memorandum to the Working Group dated 30 November 1964, and entitled "Alternative to Air Attacks on North Vietnam: Proposals for the Use of U.S. Ground Forces in Support of Diplomacy in Vietnam," Messrs. Johnson and Kattenburg of the State Department proposed the introduction of a token ground force to provide proof of our resolve as a prelude to a major diplomatic offensive. 38/ The Joint Chiefs of Staff also made a proposal for the introduction of ground troops in their 23 November 1964 memo to the Secretary of Defense. 39/ In that JCSM, which was principally concerned with analysis of various courses of action to increase pressure on the DRV, the JCS recommended the collateral deployment of Marine units to Da Nang and other units from Okinawa to Ton Son Nhut Air Base for purposes of security and deterrence in accordance with CINCPAC OPLANS. There is no documentary evidence, however, that these drafts were in any way included in the memo sent to the President.

On 1 December 1964, the President approved the recommendations of Ambassador Taylor and the NSC Principals to proceed with the implementation of the Working Group's Course of Action A and, after 30 days or

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more and with some GVN progress along specified lines, to enter a second phase program consisting "principally of progressively more serious air strikes," as in Option C. 40/ Again, the U.S. focus was on the air war, not on the ground.

B. The Focus of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

In forwarding on 11 February 1965 their proposed program for the first eight weeks of military actions against North Vietnam, the JCS told the Secretary of Defense that their plan called primarily for air-strikes but also included the collateral deployment of a MEB to Da Nang and an Army Brigade to Thailand. 41/ Neither of these deployments were for purposes of counterinsurgency but rather were intended to deter any overt DRV/Chicom retaliation and to put us in a better posture in case the deterrent failed. The JCS forwarded this proposal to the Secretary again on 4 March 1965, still without mention of the possibility of ground combat action against the Viet Cong. 42/ The first proposal from the JCS that U.S. troop units be sent to SVN for active operations against the Viet Cong came on 20 March 1965, well after the landing of the Marines at Da Nang. 43/ That the JCS were considering such a proposal before the Marines were landed is indicated obliquely in Chairman Wheeler's cover letter to the Secretary of Defense of 1 March 1965, under which he forwarded the JSOP-70 and in which he said: "In arriving at the proposed force levels the present situation in Southeast Asia was only indirectly considered, and had little, if any, influence upon the JSOP-70 force levels. This is pointed out to identify a specific problem area that requires a near term and long term solution. By separate action the JCS are addressing the problem and will provide you with their views on this subject." 44/ While the Marines were landing at Da Nang, a key man from the Washington scene was a visitor in Saigon. Although his visit was unconnected with the Marine landings per se, his actions on return to Washington provided a fair measure of the attitudes prevalent in the U.S. community in Vietnam at that juncture.

General Johnson, Chief of Staff of the Army, was in Vietnam from the 5th through the 12th of March 1965. He was given a thorough briefing on the situation by General Westmoreland and other members of the United States mission, and he brought back to Washington detailed situation reports prepared by MACV and the Ambassador. The view from Saigon, as reflected in those reports, was very grave indeed. A succinct summation of the views of the entire U.S. Mission Council in Saigon appeared in the Ambassador's Sitrep forwarded to the State Department on 11 March 1965:

"Unless (and this is primary), NVN support is checked, GVN military and paramilitary resources increased, pacification goals and concepts refined, administrative efficiency improved, and an adequate political-psychological base created, there is little likelihood of stemming the tide of the VC insurgency. Only U.S. resources can provide the pressures on NVN necessary to check Hanoi's support, although some measure of SVN armed forces participation will be required for psychological reasons; the other measures and programs required to stem the tide of VC insurgency

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are largely internal to SVN, but even here success will require a marked increase in U.S. support and participation." 45/

There is little doubt that General Johnson was impressed by the gravity of the situation in SVN as presented to him at the very time the Marines were landing at Da Nang. The report 46/ which he submitted to the Secretary of Defense on 14 March contains specific proposals, including some for deployment of additional U.S. ground combat forces, which Johnson felt should be implemented if the U.S. was to realize its objectives in SVN. Those objectives as seen by Johnson were: (1) to persuade the DRV to abandon its support and direction of the insurgency, (2) to defeat the Viet Cong insurgents, and (3) to create a stable GVN. In accord with the Ambassador, General Johnson called for U.S. action because "what the situation requires may exceed what the Vietnamese can be expected to do." To arrest the current deterioration Johnson presented a list of 21 specific actions to be taken. The upshot of these 21 points was greater U.S. involvement in terms of money, ships, aircraft, advisors, and assorted hardware, but no ground combat units were involved. They meant essentially more of the same, and all 21 points were approved by the President on 1 April 1965. 47/ There was more to the Johnson recommendations, however. To release RVNAF for offensive action, he proposed deploying a U.S. division either to defend the Bien Hoa/Ton Son Nhut airfield complex plus some coastal enclaves or to defend the highland provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and Darlac. Johnson obviously preferred the latter alternative because the enemy in the Montagnard populated highlands would be more easily identified by U.S. forces. The Secretary of Defense in commenting on the proposed deployment also preferred the second alternative although he thought neither afforded an efficient return in terms of RVNAF forces released per U.S. force input (alternative 1 called for 23,000 U.S. forces to release 5,000 ARVN; alternative 2 ratio was 15,000 U.S. to 6,000 ARVN). Secretary McNamara directed the JCS to consider the 2d alternative while emphasizing that he preferred an ROK division to one of our own. 48/ The culmination of General Johnson's report was his recommendation that the SEATO treaty be invoked to get allied participation in a four division force counter-infiltration cordon to be placed across the DMZ and the Laotian panhandle from the South China Sea to the Mekong River. In closing his report, General Johnson observed:

"In order for the USG to evaluate his [COMUSMACV's] requests properly when submitted, a policy determination must be made in the very near future that will assure the question: What should the Vietnamese be expected to do for themselves and how much more must the U.S. contribute directly to the security of South Vietnam?"

In reference to this observation Secretary McNamara wrote that the "Policy is: anything that will strengthen the position of the GVN will be sent..." 49/

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C. Attitudes West of CONUS

Both CINCPAC and General Westmoreland were very much concerned during early 1965 with the possible implementation of existing contingency plans, at least two of which as already mentioned, called for the input into Southeast Asia of U.S. troop units. The alert (Phase I) of OPLAN 32-64 was in effect as of 1 January 1965. CINCPAC clearly indicated that his thinking was geared to contingency plans in his cabled objections to the proposed deployment of the 173rd Airborne vice the Marines into Da Nang. 50/ All of his OPLANs had buildup predicated on the Marines' use of Da Nang as a base. CINCPAC is equally clear in his cable traffic of this period, however, that he is not immediately thinking in terms of the commitment of U.S. ground forces in operations against the Viet Cong. In a cable to Chairman Wheeler on 5 March 1965 he said that "the single most important thing we can do quickly to improve the security situation in SVN is to make full use of our air power." He went on in the same cable to say that the MEB should be deployed to Da Nang as soon as possible for security and also to give the GVN a boost and the Viet Cong a warning. 51/

General Westmoreland and his staff had been concerned with planning for the input of U.S. ground troops into South Vietnam in conjunction with the aforementioned CINCPAC contingency plans since late 1964. 52/ In view of the enemy's capabilities and the obvious deficiencies of the ARVN, both of which were all too apparent to observers in Vietnam (by early 1965), it is hard to see how the military planners in MACV could have disassociated the deployment of the Marines from further troop input. In the MACV Command History for 1965 there are several statements which would tend to confirm sequential thinking in the MACV staff. On the day the Marines were landing at Da Nang it is said in the History that "thus step one in the buildup of forces had been taken and subsequent steps appeared to be assured." 53/ The History also states that "the Phase II, RVN, portions of OPLAN 32-64 were essentially implemented by the U.S. buildup during 1965, although on a larger scale than planned." 54/ On 27 March 1965, General Westmoreland forwarded to CINCPAC his estimate of the situation in Vietnam and his recommendation for U.S. troop input for offensive action against the Viet Cong. In that cable COMUSMACV states that his staff commenced preparation of the estimate and troop recommendations on 13 March, five days after the Marines went into Da Nang, and the day after the Army Chief of Staff's departure from Saigon. 55/

Ambassador Taylor was not enthusiastic about any continuation of troop buildup after the landing of the Marines. He had already stated his reasons in the lengthy cable of 22 February contained herein. On 3 March, in response to a Department of State query regarding the possible employment of an international force, Taylor conveyed the text of a conversation about the MLF between Ambassador Johnson and the Australian envoy to South Vietnam. The Australian had voiced fears similar to Taylor's in that he foresaw an increased manifestation of Vietnamese xenophobia with the input into South Vietnam of foreign troops, and he feared such a move would cause the GVN "to shuck off

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greater responsibility onto USG." 56/ Taylor told the Secretary of State in another cable on the same day that he had no idea what the GVN attitude toward a MLF might be and that there were many problems involved with such a move that had yet to be ironed out. 57/ The MLF was clearly only in the talking stage, 58/ while the Marine BLT's were a fact. The discussion of the MLF is included to illustrate that the Ambassador was consistent in looking beyond the immediate tactical need to support a faltering GVN -- a need which Taylor saw just as clearly as did MACV -- to analyze the long-term ramifications of the introduction into Vietnam of foreign combat troops. Taylor's warnings in this regard were, in light of the present situation in SVN, prophetic indeed.

V. EXPECTATIONS

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V. Expectations

There seems to be sufficient evidence to conclude that General Westmoreland and his staff saw in the deployment of the Marines the beginning of greater things to come. The 1965 Command History says as much, and the rapidity with which the staff followed on the Marine BLT's with more proposals would tend to back up such a conclusion. It hardly seems a coincidence that General Johnson, immediately following his briefings by MACV, returned to Washington and recommended, among other things, that a U.S. division be deployed to SVN. CINCPAC, although obviously concerned with OPLANs and their focus on troop deployments, comes out clearly in his cable traffic for reliance on air power for the moment and for troop commitment to secure bases only. The JCS, because they had yet to address the overall question of U.S. ground force deployments, necessarily saw the Marine deployments as a stopgap measure to insure the security of U.S. lives and property in case of a partial or total GVN collapse. Traffic between the Embassy and the Department of State indicated that further ground force deployments as a deterrent to NVN invasion were in the thinking but were not yet in the proposal stage, and the Ambassador clearly had serious objections to further troop input. It appears that for the moment, with the possible exception of General Westmoreland, his staff, and perhaps an important ally in the person of General Johnson in Washington, the Marine deployment was taken at face value and that the official Washington hopes were pinned on early NVN response to the Rolling Thunder pressure, then just in its beginning stages.

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VI. Analysis

This paper has raised basically two analytical questions. First, what was the significance of the landing of the two Marine battalions rather than other units, such as the 173rd Airborne? Second, what was the mix of objectives behind the deployment, and did the deployment meet these objectives?

The significance of putting the Marines into Da Nang turns on whether this deployment was intended or was viewed (1) as the first elements in a phased build-up of U.S. ground combat forces, or (2) as a one-shot response to a peculiar security need at Da Nang. There is evidence for both propositions.

There are two pieces of evidence in support of the phased build-up proposition. First, no less than seven CINCPAC contingency plans treated Da Nang as a base for U.S. Marine Corps activity, and at least two of those plans provided for major Marine ground forces in the I Corps tactical zone of South Vietnam. Except for Phase II of OPLAN 32-64, however, contingency plan build-ups of force were predicated on overt DRV or Chinese Communist action. At the time of the initial landings, such overt action was anticipated in the OPLAN but had not yet occurred. It was a fact, on the other hand, that some sort of action was needed in the South to halt the course of the insurgency there, and that two Marine BLT's would not do the trick.

The second piece of evidence was the last minute attempt by Ass't Secretary of Defense McNaughton to substitute the 173rd Airborne for the Marines, and CINCPAC's strong reaction against this attempt. The only apparent rationale for the McNaughton move is as a blocking measure against expected pressures for further build-ups as embodied in the contingency plans. The substitution would have created planning tangles for the Chiefs and CINCPAC and, therefore, would have delayed pressures for further deployment pending the development of new plans. CINCPAC's vigorous response, based on administrative and logistic arguments, coupled with concern for the loss of an airmobile reserve force, persuaded Washington and thwarted the McNaughton effort. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that McNaughton, at least on the record, did not receive any support for his attempt. Conceivably, Ambassador Taylor, who had expressed serious reservations about the implications of the ground force deployment, could have joined forces with McNaughton. Taylor's failure to do so was probably based on the fact that he did not believe the pressures could be significantly thwarted by the substitution, and that, therefore, it made much more military sense to proceed as planned.

The evidence against the phased build-up proposition and for the one-shot-security hypothesis rests on one major document, and paradoxically, on the absence of other documents. The major document is the McGeorge Bundy Memorandum for the President of February 7, 1965. In this memorandum, Bundy reviews the entire situation in Vietnam without any reference to future ground force deployment -- even though the request for the Marine

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BLT's was only two weeks away. Moreover, the usual flood of documentation preceding a decision of significance is not to be found. In other words, it appears that the key decision-makers in Washington are not focusing hard on the importance of the deployment. The attention-getter, as the Bundy memo indicates, was the impending air war against North Vietnam.

The significance of the Marine BLT deployment must also be measured up to the objectives intended by the deployment. There were four distinguishable rationales:

- (1) Freeing ARVN forces from static defense to base security;
- (2) Providing added security for U.S. air bases being used in the air war against North Vietnam;
- (3) Signaling Hanoi with increased U.S. determination to pay a higher price in meeting its commitments; and
- (4) Bolstering GVN morale.

The first objective was the one most stressed publicly -- to release RVNAF for offensive action against the Viet Cong. General Westmoreland cabled the JCS on 22 February saying that the deployment of the Marines to Da Nang would result ultimately in freeing four RF companies, one tank platoon, and another RF battalion then being formed. 59/ The MACV Monthly Evaluation of March 1965 stated that only two RF companies had in fact been released. 60/ It is apparent, then, that this objective could not have been taken very seriously. While it can be argued that any slight improvement in the local force ratios vis-a-vis the Viet Cong was desirable; even the most optimistic prediction of releasable RVNAF units would not have had much importance.

A second rationale was the notion of security for a major U.S. air base being used in bombing operations against North Vietnam. Da Nang was exposed and the probability of a Viet Cong attack on it could not be ignored. While the two Marine BLT deployment, by itself, was recognized as being insufficient for high level of confidence about base security, there can be little doubt that U.S. troops did make that important base more secure. In retrospect, it could be construed that this was the first sign of U.S. awareness of RVNAF inadequacy. There is, however, no documentary evidence available to support this view and, in fact, the real extent of this ineffectiveness was not recognized until a few months later.

A third objective may have been to signal Hanoi with the seriousness of the U.S. resolve in Vietnam. Notwithstanding the relatively minute combat power imposed in two battalions, the very fact that they were deployed would be a much clearer sign to Hanoi of U.S. determination in the fleeting appearance of a few jet aircraft or the shadowy presence offshore of a mighty fleet of ships. Taken in conjunction with the well-known U.S. shibboleth against involvement in a major Asian land war, the

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deployment should have been a highly visible step unequivocal in its meaning to Hanoi. Yet, there is no evidence that anyone in the U.S. government intended the deployment to convey such a signal and there was no discussion of what responses we expected from Hanoi. If this indeed were an unspoken objective, it made little dent on NVN designs. If anything, it may have aided those in Hanoi who wanted to send additional regular NVA units into SVN.

A fourth U.S. objective was bolstering morale within the GVN and the concomitant willingness to carry on the fight. It was quite reasonable to assume that the Marines, like the air strikes on NVN that preceded them, did have a beneficial effect on morale. It is equally obvious, however, that any such effects would be transitory. Long-term improvements in morale could only come with dramatic and lasting alteration of the situation, and the two Marine battalions did not have that capability by themselves.

It seems from this vantage point that only the objective of base security really made sense. The deployment of the Marines to Da Nang might have deterred an attack on the base by a regiment of main force Viet Cong. The Marine Infantry were dug in on commanding terrain facing the North and West along the most likely avenues of approach. The security of the base was by no means assured by their presence, however, as by their own admission they were in no position to prevent determined attack -- or, especially, raids and mortar attacks -- the kind that had done so much damage to Bien Hoa the year before. ^{61/} The U.S. forces only had responsibility for half of the base complex, and it was doubted that the RVNAF could prevent the Viet Cong infiltrating sabotage squads through the heavily populated areas on the GVN side. The Marines did not, as Secretary Rusk said they would, put a tight security ring around the base. The ring was not closed until considerably later, and even then, the Viet Cong successfully penetrated the defenses and caused considerable damage in a raid on 1 July 1965 -- the first of a series of raids that have continued up to the present.

The landing of the Marines at Da Nang was a watershed event in the history of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. It represented a major decision made without much fanfare -- and without much planning. Whereas the decision to begin bombing North Vietnam was the product of a year's discussion, debate, and a lot of paper, and whereas the consideration of pacification policies reached talmudic proportions over the years, this decision created less than a ripple. A mighty commandment of U.S. foreign policy -- thou shall not engage in an Asian land war -- had been breached. Besides CINCPAC and General Westmoreland who favored the deployment, Ambassador Taylor who concurred with deep reservation, and ASD McNaughton who apparently tried to add a monkey wrench, this is a decision without faces. The seeming ease with which the Marines were introduced and the mild reaction from Hanoi served to facilitate what was to come. It also weakened the position of those who were, a few scant months later, to oppose the landing of further U.S. ground combat forces.

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VII. FOOTNOTES

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5. MACV Msg 220743Z February 1965.
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