The Kosygin Visit and the Bombing of North Vietnam
(January—February 1965)

SUMMARY: The key date of this period is February 7, 1965, when the United States began a bombing of North Vietnam that has remained virtually continuous down to the present. The United States decided to bomb after a period of unprecedented antigovernment and anti-American demonstrations in the cities of South Vietnam, and only a little more than a week after a new coup brought a junta to power whose commitment to continue the war appeared increasingly dubious. Moreover, both before and after February 7, various international moves were afoot to arrange a negotiated settlement of the war. Disintegration in Saigon and the gathering strength of these diplomatic moves had led a number of foreign journalists to predict that the war would be over in six months. The events of February 7 in themselves halted neither the agitation in Saigon nor the international diplomatic moves. However, in the course of February, the hard-liners in the Saigon government strengthened their position, notably through the final ouster of General Nguyen Khanh, and the United States moved once and for all to continuing and systematic bombing of North Vietnamese military targets.

We have already seen how, in January 1964, domestic unrest and pressures to end the war were cut off by a military coup, of which local U.S. authorities were at the very least not unaware. In January 1965, there was a renewed outbreak of pro-neutralist, anti-government, and increasingly anti-American demonstrations; a general strike in Hué on January 7
ble. At a time when the political situation in Saigon was again deteriorating, and thereby threatening the alleged legitimacy of the American “presence,” Premier Khanh began to call for aggressive action against North Vietnam to reinforce his shaky personal position. At a time when international pressures for bringing the problems of Indo-China to the conference table were intensified, the United States not only openly revealed its disinclination to participate but mounted a large-scale bombardment subsequent to an incident, on August 2, which U.S. officials termed minor and to a second incident, on August 4, which, if it actually occurred, terminated in an American victory. Thus, the bombardment of North Vietnam was not only out of all proportion to the incidents alleged to have caused it; it served to worsen a climate which was becoming increasingly favorable to a negotiated settlement and concomitantly, in behalf of larger American objectives, it served to prop up the tottering regime of Premier Nguyen Khanh.

of South Vietnam. However, barely two days had elapsed before the resilience of the opposition was again revealed. Beginning with criticism by two prominent Buddhist leaders and culminating in demonstrations by many thousands of Buddhists and students in Saigon, Hué, and Danang, the opposition mounted its cause, and General Khanh, apparently under American pressure, was forced to relinquish his position on August 25. Although his retreat was only partial (the Khanh dictatorship was replaced by a triumvirate of which Khanh was a member), the showdown indicated that Buddhist opposition would continue to be a powerful factor to be reckoned with. (See *Le Monde*, August 18 through August 26.)
(LM, January 8, 1965) spread within a week to Danang, where employees at the U.S. air base failed to turn up for work (LM, January 13). At least two Saigon papers published editorials deplo ring the continuation of the war and demanding negotiations (LM, January 7, 1965). Leaflets in Huế and Danang attacked the Huong regime of the moment as servile collaborators with the Americans (LM, January 15, 1965). On January 17, police fired on demonstrators in Huế and Dalat, wounding four students (NYT, January 18, 1965, p. 1). A few days later, thirty were wounded as police and paratroopers dispersed a Buddhist demonstration of 5,000 in Saigon (LM, January 21, 1965). On January 22, 500 Buddhists demonstrated in front of the U.S. Embassy, and the USIS library at Huế was sacked (LM, January 23, 1965). In the wake of these disturbances, the civilian Huong regime was finally overthrown on January 27 by a military group headed by Nguyen Khanh (NYT, January 27, 1965, p. 1). But unrest persisted within the country, together with evidence of deep divisions within this junta and repeated rumors of a possible negotiated settlement (NYT, January 29, 1965, p. 1; February 3, p. 1; February 5, p. 2). The crisis, however, was primarily domestic rather than military; in fact on February 3, the United States Military Assistance Command in Saigon described the month of January 1965 “as the most successful month of Government military operations to date” (NYT, February 4, 1965, p. 3).

This state of extreme internal confusion was to some extent stabilized after the decision of the United States to bomb North Vietnam, on February 7. At the time, we were told that this was in response to a guerilla raid on Pleiku in which eight Americans were killed; but we now know that no more than twelve hours elapsed between the beginning of the Pleiku raid and the dropping of bombs on North Vietnam.

Meanwhile McGeorge Bundy (who had flown to Saigon shortly before the raid) said on his return
that the immediate effect of the Pleiku and North Vietnamese raids was to pull together American and Vietnamese leaders (NYT, February 9, 1965, p. 12). Under the circumstances, this significant United States escalation could not but have the effect of demonstrating to all South Vietnamese, government and opposition alike, the determination of the United States to continue the war.¹

Premier Kosygin was in Hanoi at the time of the U.S. escalation; it has been alleged that he came with proposals for mediating the conflict.² On February 23, the Russians and French began high-level consultations in Paris concerning such a possibility; and de Gaulle called publicly for negotiations without preconditions.³ On February 24, U Thant made a similar appeal, saying that "the great American people, if only they know the true facts and the background to the developments in South Vietnam, will agree with me that further bloodshed is unnecessary" (NYT, February 25, 1965, p. 1). On February 26, Premier Kosygin for the first time alluded publicly to

¹ Senator Everett Dirksen blandly commented, "If we hadn't given an adequate response, we might have given the impression we might pull out" (NYT, February 9, 1965, p. 13).

² This was the expectation in Washington at the time of Bundy's departure for Saigon. The New York Times spoke of "the developing speculation in the Administration . . . that Mr. Kosygin's trip might be the opening move in a broad Soviet attempt to mediate between the United States and the Hanoi regime for a settlement of the Vietnamese war" (NYT, February 2, 1965, p. 2).

³ The surprising role of the Soviet Union in this period was depicted clearly by the Chinese in November: "Johnson wanted to play his fraudulent game of 'unconditional discussions.' So the new leaders of the CPSU put forward the idea of 'unconditional negotiations.' On February 16 this year, the day after Kosygin's return to Moscow, the Soviet government officially put before Vietnam and China a proposal to convene a new international conference on Indo-China without prior conditions, which in fact was advocacy of 'unconditional negotiations' on the Vietnam question. On February 23, disregarding the stand which the Vietnamese government had taken against this proposal and without waiting for a reply from China, the new leaders of the CPSU discussed the question of calling the above-mentioned international conference with the President of France through the Soviet ambassador" (Peking People's Daily, November 11, 1965).
the possibility of finding “at a conference table the measures permitting a solution of Indo-Chinese problems” (LM, March 3, 1965; see below. Previously the Russians had talked only of a Conference on Laos or Cambodia). Meanwhile, on February 24, the U.S. Air Force announced publicly that it was using its own jets in air strikes against the NLF, thus abandoning any pretense to an advisory role. The New York Times, reporting this announcement, commented: “The acknowledgment of the change had the effect of stiffening Washington’s position in the face of continuing appeals abroad for negotiations” (NYT, February 25, 1965, p. 1). On February 27, with great fanfare, the State Department released its White Paper, which endeavored to prove that the war was not “a local rebellion”: “In Vietnam a Communist government has set out deliberately to conquer a sovereign people in a neighboring state.”

As 1964 came to an end, both the military and the political situation in South Vietnam began to deteriorate rapidly. The Vietcong were able to mount larger operations, such as the battle of Binh Ghia, early in January 1965.

4 Facts were necessary to support this claim, and a certain “escalation” can be observed in U.S. estimates of infiltration from North Vietnam during this period. On July 29, 1964, a U.S. military spokesman suggested at a news conference “that roughly 10,000 men had infiltrated from the North over the last five years” (NYT, January 27, 1965, p. 2). On January 26, 1965, it was reported from Saigon that “United States intelligence agencies have sharply increased their estimate” to “at least 19,300 men . . . for a period only seven months longer” (Ibid.). To this figure was then added a further 15,000 “based on information from only one source” (Ibid.). As for the net importance of all this, “United States officials here have attributed to this aid a weight no greater than 20 percent in explaining the headway being made by the Vietcong” (Ibid.). The White Paper itself estimates infiltration of “nearly 20,000” and “probably 17,000 more infiltrators” (NYT, February 28, 1965, p. 30).

5 How much of this increased effort was due to infiltration from the North remains a murky question, one which the State Department White Paper did not answer satisfactorily. Jean Lacouture, Le Monde correspondent, wrote in May 1965 that until the middle of 1964 only ten percent of the Vietcong’s weapons came from the North; in the last six months of 1964,
from Saigon reflected an increasing pessimism within American military circles. More significant, however, for the events of February 1965 were the political changes in the Saigon government.

Despite Premier Khanh’s consolidation of power in August 1964, political instability had continued to plague the Saigon government. On September 13, General Lam Van Phat attempted a coup against Khanh. A tribal revolt broke out late the same month. However, with the appointment of a civilian, Tran Van Huong, as premier on November 1, some semblance of stability appeared to have returned. On December 4, South Vietnam’s military leaders announced support for the Huong government. The United States and specifically Ambassador Maxwell Taylor voiced their full support for the Huong government. Yet on December 20, a new coup erupted which deposed Premier Huong. American reaction was immediate and hostile. Ambassador Taylor exerted strong pressure on the “young Turks” to restore civilian government, and early in January, Premier Huong was returned to his position.

As every observer has written, South Vietnamese politics are complicated. However, from the few analyses available, we shall try to sketch out a general picture to explain the December events. In an article published in April 1965, two special correspondents of the New York Herald Tribune, Pham Xuan An and Beverly Deepe, identified three camps: (1) a “pro-Neutralist and pro-Buddhist wing,” led by General Nguyen Chanh Thi; (2) a “rigid anti-Communist hard-line wing,” led by General Nguyen Van Thieu; and (3) the “pro-French moderates,” led by General Duong Van Minh (NYHT, April 11, 1965). Robert Shaplen, the well-informed New Yorker correspondent, has made a similar analysis, with stress on the first two groups. An, Deepe, and Shaplen agree that General Thi has close connections with the Buddhist monk Tri Quang, whose views An and Deepe describe as “anti-Catholic, anti-American, and pro-Neutralist.” General Thieu is also, by general agreement, regarded as the leader of the militant anti-Communist, generally Catholic, right wing.

With these three camps in mind, let us look at the coup of December 20, 1964. Prior to then, the Duong Van Minh group, the “pro-French moderates,” appears to have lost
power; Minh himself lost his place on October 26 as titular "chief of state," a post to which Khanh had reluctantly appointed him. Just prior to December 20, the Huong government announced the retirement of large numbers of military men, many of whom appeared to be associated with Duong Van Minh. Thus the elimination of the third group produced a growing polarization between the Thi and Thieu factions, a process apparently receiving the support of the American government. Buddhist demonstrations began to erupt at about this time, adding to a growing pressure against the government. The leader of the December 20 coup was General Nguyen Chanh Thi, seconded by Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky. Ky's position has never been very clear, but available analyses show him to have been in association with Thi, though apparently not completely committed to his views. Khanh himself was not directly involved in the December 20 coup, but came to its support almost immediately.6

The political scene was dominated by Buddhist-led strikes and demonstrations. On January 3, with the Saigon government again on the verge of collapse, thousands of South Vietnamese demonstrated in Saigon. Despite government warnings that in the future demonstrators would be dispersed by force, more demonstrations took place in Saigon the next day. At Hué, demonstrating Buddhists and students appealed for a two-day general strike. Faced with general contempt for its authority, the Saigon government confessed, "The authority of the government is trampled under—martial law is not being respected—the forces of law and order have lost control." On the seventh, Hué was almost completely paralyzed by a general strike called by protesters against the regime; in Saigon two newspapers, Viet Nam Nouveau and Journal d'Extreme Orient, published editorials that deplored continuation of the war and demanded negotiations (LM, January 8, 1965). By January 13, the protest strikes had spread to Danang, and Vietnamese employees of the Ameri-

6 Khanh issued an order of the day with a strong anti-American tone (LM, Dec. 24, 1964). Ambassador Taylor reportedly reacted by saying that henceforth the Americans would be "one hundred percent opposed" to Khanh. The growing feud between Khanh and Taylor was widely reported at the time; it was generally recognized that one or the other had to go. Taylor put great pressure on Huong to stand firm (LM, Dec. 27-28, 1964).
can air base there failed to report for work (LM, January 13, 1965).

By January 10, the contending government factions had agreed to a compromise, and an uneasy calm prevailed in Saigon. However, Buddhist attacks against the Huong government and against Ambassador Taylor increased in intensity. From the statements of the demonstrators and their Buddhist leaders, it is clear that they regarded Tran Van Huong as an American puppet and wanted him entirely out of the government. The Saigon government responded with a truculent announcement: "The anti-Communist and anti-neutrality position of the generals of the forces of the Republic of Vietnam remains clear and resolute" (LM, January 13, 1965). This statement immediately became the target of the demonstrators. Leaflets distributed in Huế and Danang said the announcement was imposed by the Americans "in order to permit them to continue the struggle which they are conducting against the Communists in Vietnam;" the Americans are anxious to keep Huong in power, the leaflets charged, because "they cannot find more servile collaborators." The appeal of one handbill epitomized the entire protest movement: "The Vietnam population reclaims their right to democratic self-determination" (LM, January 14, 1965). The mounting pressure of the demonstrations provoked the junta to action. On January 19, police fired on anti-government demonstrators in Dalat, killing at least three. The same day, Saigon announced a reshuffling of generals in the Huong cabinet. Huong seems to have made a conciliatory gesture to the military (LM, January 19, 1965), inviting not "soft-line" Thi but "hard-line" Thieu into the government. The Buddhists at once reaffirmed their total opposition to the government, accusing it of "profiting from support of the Americans and former Diemists" in applying a policy aimed at division and destruction of Buddhism (LM, January 21, 1965). On January 22, police and paratroopers put down a demonstration of 5,000 Buddhists in Saigon, wounding at least 30. (LM, January 22, 1965). The next day, 500 demonstrated before the American Embassy and broke windows of the U.S. Information Service library. At this point, preparations long underway for election of a National Congress were abandoned (LM, January 26, 1965).

On January 27, another coup, led by Nguyen Khanh and Nguyen Chanh Thi, deposed the civilian government and returned Khanh to power. The American view, reported from
Saigon, was that a Buddhist-military coalition government would now arise which would negotiate with the National Liberation Front (LM, January 28, 1965). Catholic opposition was made immediately apparent, and directed squarely against Khanh. Joseph Alsop, on January 31, wrote ominously of an impending defeat in South Vietnam which could lead to the crumbling of the American position in Thailand and the Philippines. He attributed Sihanouk’s anti-American policy in Laos to his expectation of American defeat in South Vietnam, and even postulated it as a major factor in de Gaulle’s policies.

The time was ripe, as it was not to be again, for decorous American disengagement. Vocal elements of a war-weary people were pleading for peace, advocating negotiations, and demanding expulsion of the “foreigners.” The morale of the South Vietnamese military forces had sagged to a new low, as the desertion rate—30 percent in January 1965—revealed. And the government of the “Republic of Vietnam” had become a mockery, by its own admission held in contempt by the people and powerless to act effectively. The manifestation of overwhelming American power during the Tonkin Gulf “incident” had won little friendship for the United States among Vietnamese of the South, either from admiration or fear. The American “presence,” except to a few in power, was patently unwanted. Clearly, a decision by the United States government to remain and prosecute the war against the rebels and the North could scarcely be justified as a defense of the freedom of the South Vietnamese—who had vociferously demonstrated their desire to be free of American intervention. Such a decision would be, inevitably, a commitment to transform a local civil war into an American adventure, with the prize supremacy in Asia.

Reports of the rioting in South Vietnam, of the increasingly deteriorating military situation, and of the appalling impotence of the Saigon regimes provoked contradictory, but predictable, responses in Washington. Senators Morse, Mansfield, Monroney and Cooper publicly expressed serious doubts about the wisdom and the relevance of American policy. Senator Russell, later to be identified as a fierce advocate of expanded hostilities, seized the initiative and called for Senate

7 Jean Lacouture wrote in Le Monde that Nguyen Khanh might be undergoing a reconversion, envisaging himself now as the leader of a government which would negotiate peace for his country.
debate on Vietnam policy (LM, January 12, 1965). The position of the Administration, less and less clear on the surface, was evidently already converging toward that of General Maxwell Taylor, who reportedly maintained, "We ought to carry on and never give up because we are frustrated and discouraged" (LM, January 11, 1965). By late January it began to appear that the Administration's new policy in regard to the Vietnam conflict was fully formulated. Administration spokesman McGeorge Bundy, once of the opinion that the Vietnamese should be left to go it alone, expressed strong doubts about the capacity of the South Vietnamese to cope with the Vietcong unaided; extension of the war, he said, depended upon the degree of infiltration from North Vietnam (NYT, January 24, 1965; LM, January 25, 1965).

It will be recalled that in the months following the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963, and also in July and August of 1964, various initiatives had been taken to seek a negotiated solution (see above). This was also the case early in 1965. An important sign that the climate for negotiations was improving was the increasingly important role of the U.S.S.R., as opposed to China, in Hanoi. Supporters of Administration policy have often argued that the pro-Soviet wing in Hanoi was "moderate" and would be willing to negotiate. Jean Lacouture, the Le Monde correspondent, has

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8 On January 27, Ambassador Taylor went to Vientiane and Bangkok. We cannot be sure of the reasons for his absence, but it most likely was bound up with intensified American air activity in Laos. On December 29, General Phoumi Nosavan, head of the right wing forces in Laos, visited Saigon. Shortly thereafter, the United States began openly to bomb Pathet Lao targets in Laos. On February 4, Premier Souvana Phouma denounced Phoumi. As American air activity in Laos intensified, there were increasing reports of attacks against North Vietnamese villages. Thus, on January 5, Hanoi accused the Americans and the South Vietnamese of launching such attacks (LM, January 5, 1965). On January 23, the United States State Department accused North Vietnam of wanting to provoke a clash with the United States.

9 Speculation on American choices had been heard frequently during January. On January 9, the London Economist reported that the situation was deteriorating in South Vietnam, and that "to put it right it will almost certainly be necessary to mount air strikes against North Vietnamese targets" (p. 94). Western correspondents in Saigon were reported as predicting, even after the coup, "the emergence within six months of a government that will present an ultimatum-invitation to the United States to get out of South Vietnam" (London Economist, January 30, 1965, p. 419).
reported the continuing prevalence of pro-Soviet attitudes among the highest echelons of North Vietnamese leadership (Vietnam: Between Two Truces, p. 230). The announcement of Premier Kosygin's visit to Hanoi in early February indicated that Soviet influence was again on the rise in Hanoi; and American observers saw in his visit signs that Moscow and Hanoi were both thinking of negotiations:

Now again the Asian Communists, this time in South Vietnam, seem ready to bid for power through a negotiated settlement. The Soviet Union, apparently fearful that a continuation of the war in South Vietnam may lead to United States bombing of North Vietnam and its own involvement, is reappearing in the role of a diplomatic agent (NYT, February 5, 1965, p. 2; emphasis added).  

Moreover, there were signs that the NLF was moving in a pro-Soviet direction. On January 1, 1965, Moscow announced that the NLF had reached agreement with the Soviet government to set up a permanent delegation in Moscow (LM, January 1, 1965). The Soviet move was evidently designed to counter the influence of Peking, which had welcomed the establishment of an NLF delegation in September, following the Tonkin Gulf affair. Although the evidence is fragmentary, this and other instances suggest that when the war situation becomes more grave, both North Vietnam and the NLF tend to move in the direction of Peking, and, conversely, when prospects for a peaceful solution appear, they favor the stance of the U.S.S.R.

Early in January, Foreign Minister Gromyko pledged North Vietnam Soviet aid in the event of attack (LM, January 5, 1965). New trade agreements were signed between the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. These Soviet moves must be seen, however, in the light of continuing friendly gestures by the Soviets toward the United States. On January 8, Izvestia called for a meeting between President Johnson and Premier Kosygin. On February 5, President Johnson reciprocated and said he would like to visit the U.S.S.R.

10 Thus the record seems to challenge President Johnson's claim to Congress on May 4, 1965, that "when we began the bombings (i.e. of North Vietnam on February 7) there was no talk of negotiations" (Dept. of State Bulletin, May 24, 1965, p. 818).
What was in the wind may be seen in the remarks of a *Le Monde* correspondent, who wrote, "the Russians generally admit that one must help the United States save face in this sector," namely Vietnam (*LM*, February 5, 1965). The purpose of Soviet diplomatic moves was not lost on the Chinese: on January 19, Peking accused the Soviet leaders of practicing Khrushchevism without Khrushchev (*LM*, January 19, 1965).

The *rapprochement* between Moscow and Hanoi culminated in the Kosygin visit. On February 3, the North Vietnamese press published lavish praise of the Soviet Union. Kosygin arrived on February 6. Early in the morning of Sunday, February 7 (Vietnam time), a small band of Vietcong attacked the American base at Pleiku. About twelve hours later American planes started attacking North Vietnam in force.

On February 8, while the high-level Soviet delegation conferred with officials in Hanoi, U.S. planes began to bomb North Vietnam. This extraordinary tactic was said to be a response to a Vietcong attack on the American base at Pleiku.

The time of the Pleiku incident was Saturday afternoon in Washington. Clearly, American planes must already have been poised for the attack, since no more than twelve hours elapsed between the beginning of the mortar shelling at Pleiku and the first dropping of bombs. One is forced to conclude that the attack had been planned in advance, and that a sudden decision was made that Pleiku constituted a suitable pretext.

The attack on North Vietnam, at a time when the Soviet premier was there, was clearly a challenge to the Soviets, who only a short time before had promised their aid to North Vietnam in case of attack. Kosygin concluded his visit to

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11 That the Russians actually had such intentions was confirmed in a bitter letter addressed by the Chinese Communists to the Soviet Central Committee on November 11, 1965, where the Chinese accused the Russians of having tried to help the United States find an honorable solution to the Vietnamese dilemma.

12 It might be noted that several times after February 7, newspapers reported comments of American officials that the raids against the North had not been followed by any concrete response from the Communist side. Apparently one of the dialogues current in Washington for some time had been whether U.S. military action against North Vietnam would or would not bring about active intervention by China, Russia, or both. W. W. Rostow was reported by *Newsweek* (March 9, 1964) to have argued, in advocating his plan No. 6 for escalating attacks on North Viet-
vate discussions on the question of Vietnam for a long time, and that he was now prepared to recommend preliminary moves designed to produce a workable conference and, hopefully, a peaceful settlement (NYT, February 25, 1965). France, the Soviet Union, and North Vietnam were prompt in announcing their support of the Secretary-General's recommendations (Hamilton, NYT, February 25, 1965). Revealing some of his evident vexation at the stiffened posture of the Johnson administration, U Thant took the occasion to remind American officials of certain truths: "The political and diplomatic method of discussions and negotiations alone," he said, "can create conditions which will enable the United States to withdraw gracefully from that part of the world." Appealing to the American public at large, he remarked: "I am sure that the great American people, if only they knew the true facts and the background to the developments in South Vietnam, will agree with me that further bloodshed is unnecessary." The implications were clear when he reminded his audience that "in times of war and of hostilities the first casualty is truth" (NYT, February 25, 1965).

The Secretary-General, who had maintained a discreet silence throughout the preceding months of anxiety, had set a thankless task for himself, for the response of the United States government was curt: "There are no authorized negotiations underway with Mr. Thant" (Gottlieb, Sane World, September 1965). His plan was formally rejected (NYT, March 10, 1965).

While efforts to promote negotiations continued to be rejected or ignored in Washington, the situation in Saigon remained unchanged. Demonstrations continued to erupt in various cities of South Vietnam. In fact, as February drew toward a close, explicit calls for a negotiated peace were more openly heard in South Vietnam. On February 16, troops fired on a large group of demonstrators in Danang. Several leaders were arrested, and one man was sentenced to death, a move apparently supported by General Thi. On February 26, Le Monde again reported from Saigon rumors about impending peace talks (LM, February 25, 1965). In sum, agitation aimed at putting pressure on the Quat government to explore avenues for negotiations was widespread and con-

18 Cf. NYT, March 4, 1965, p. 10: "The prospect of a Buddhist government in South Vietnam willing to recognize Vietcong politicians is not remote, according to diplomatic observers."
tinuous. Significantly, these moves were supported by members of religious sects other than the Buddhists, notably the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, and some Catholics.

While popular pressures for negotiations continued throughout February, significant changes were occurring within the Saigon government. On February 19, a new coup was attempted in Saigon, led by one Colonel Phan Ngoc Thao. Thao came from one of South Vietnam’s most prominent Catholic families and earlier had been attached to the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington. He was described by the Le Monde correspondent as “one of the fiercest enemies” of General Nguyen Chanh Thi. The general interpretation was that the forces behind Colonel Thao were the old Diemist officers trying to make a comeback. The Thao coup was reportedly supported by Tran Thien Khiem, then ambassador to the United States (LM, February 20, 21, 22, 1965). Ambassador Khiem, one might note, had been closely associated with then General Nguyen Khanh in the coup of January 30, 1964. The coup leaders announced the deposition of Khanh and their intention of setting up a government of resistance against Communism and neutralism. Saigon radio, in the hands of the Thao forces, began to praise Ngo Dinh Diem and, interestingly, attacked Henry Cabot Lodge, implying that he had aided the anti-Diem forces in the overthrow of the old leader. Since the coup was started by the right-wing, a reaction from the left-wing was inevitable. The following day, General Thi, who had been in consultation with Buddhist and student leaders, succeeded in recapturing Saigon, and reestablished General Khanh, for a moment at least, in power. During those days, The New York Times carried dispatches from Saigon reporting that Vietcong elements had infiltrated the highest levels of the army.

What happened in the hours after Thi’s recapture of power is unclear. On February 23, it was announced that General Tran Van Minh (“Little Minh”) had taken over command of the armed forces. Little Minh was a moderate Catholic, and appears to have been considered a member of a pro-French middle-of-the-road group, to which his namesake Duong Van Minh also belonged. Perhaps the most significant shift in the power constellation was the decline of Thi and the elevation of Nguyen Cao Ky (LM, February 23, 1965). The evidence for this break is the composition of the new five-man supreme military committee, announced on March 5. The committee was headed by General Nguyen Van Thieu, and in-
cluded Ky as a member, but not Thi, who remained as the commander of the first corps area, based at Danang. The events following the Thao coup did have one clear-cut result. Nguyen Khanh was eliminated and shortly thereafter was exiled from the country.

Every report from Saigon at that time reflected confusion; no one appeared to know exactly what had happened. However, in retrospect a pattern may be discerned. As we have stated, even after Khanh was eliminated, dispatches reported the continuing interest of the Quat government in finding a peaceful solution. In mid-April, Phan Huy Quat’s deputy premier, Tran Van Tuyen, gave an interview to *Le Monde* in which he said: “This war must be stopped. . . . It is necessary to create a government with roots in the masses. . . . In such a context, the left-wing South Vietnamese forces could find a place. . . .” (*Viet Report*, July, 1965). As a result, Quat was bitterly attacked, particularly by Catholic elements. Thus it would appear that the civilian and essentially Buddhist elements around Quat still leaned toward a peaceful solution. However, the makeup of the five-man military committee, headed, it will be recalled, by General Thieu, was dominated by hard-line elements, newly reinforced by the adherence of Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky. The question as to who would win out in the end, Quat or the combined Ky-Thieu forces, was settled on June 11, when the Quat government fell and was replaced by a military junta dominated by Ky and Thieu.

The course of U.S. air escalation during February also followed an interesting pattern in its choice of targets. After the initial American attack of February 7 on North Vietnam, no further attacks were made by U.S. planes until March 2, although South Vietnamese planes staged a major air attack on North Vietnam on February 12. However, within South Vietnam and Laos, U.S. air activity intensified. On February 19, Danang-based U.S. planes attacked Communist forces in Laos. On February 24, the United States, for the first time, admitted officially that U.S. planes were directly participating in government operations against the Vietcong (*NYT*, February 25, 1965). On the following day, more U.S. jet planes were thrown into the fight against the Vietcong.

U.S. actions in Vietnam are perhaps best seen at two levels, one general and the other specific. Since President Kennedy’s decision in 1961 to send major military and economic assistance to South Vietnam, the United States had pursued a
policy intended to prevent a Communist victory. However, it was apparently not until the discussion in 1964 of Rostow's double-pronged plan No. 6 that Washington envisaged the bombing of North Vietnam as a means of checking both Vietcong successes and political disintegration in the South. The Tonkin Gulf incident marked the first test of that policy. Thus, one can conclude that at least since August 1964, the United States had decided on a general policy of bombing the North. However, there remains the question of the specific timing of the attacks.

As we point out in other sections of this study, a remarkably large number of U.S. attacks occurred when moves toward negotiations were afoot or when the Saigon government was in danger of falling into the hands of a faction that favored negotiations. The timing of U.S. escalation in February suggests that both factors were probably involved. The Soviet Union, France, U Thant, and possibly even North Vietnam were pressing their efforts to secure negotiations, as we have noted. In Saigon, rumors of negotiations were spreading. *Le Monde* reported on February 26 that "initiatives in favor of peace are growing in Saigon." Neutralist talk was prominent in several Saigon newspapers.

If American escalation was timed to head off peace moves, then one might ask: How was this possible? Here we enter the realm of interpretation, and we are aware of the hazards this presents to the historian who is obliged to deal with insufficient facts. The material presented so far has been based on current accounts, and our main contribution has been to present reports revealing a recurring pattern of political decay in Saigon, international peace moves, and American escalation. What we say now is our own interpretation.

We know that after the second American escalation in February, the positions of Hanoi and of the NLF stiffened, as their spokesmen at the Phnom Penh conference made clear. We know that China's attitude, always hard, hardened even further (though late in January, the Chinese had apparently been willing to attend a new Geneva conference). Obviously if Hanoi, the NLF, and Peking, major forces in eventual negotiations, rejected peace proposals, no conference was possible. But, if these three were convinced that America was only acting out of desperation and if they in fact did not fear the destruction ensuing from air attacks, why should they not continue to press for negotiations?

Here we might do well to recall what happened in the
Korean War between the time negotiations first began and two years later when the armistice was signed at Panmunjom: the war continued both on land and in the air—North Korea was devastated by American air power, and Chinese and North Korean armies sustained tremendous losses in the land battles that went on continuously. It is probable that the NLF, Hanoi, and Peking, with the Korean experience as their model, concluded that America was determined to pursue the war, with increased air attacks on the North and increased infusion of men and equipment into the South, even while negotiations were going on. In such a case, Hanoi and the NLF would have faced the danger of lowering the morale of their peoples by conjuring up false possibilities of peace through negotiation.

Moreover, and perhaps even more significantly, the NLF remembered what had happened at Geneva, when Moscow, Peking, and Ho Chi Minh agreed to the partition of the country, requiring the Cochin-Chinese Vietminh to surrender large tracts of territory they had won from the French. The Vietcong guerrillas would have regarded agreement to negotiate on the part of Hanoi and NLF leaders, in the face of increasing American commitment to the fight, as a sign of weakness, and even worse, as a sign of a second possible betrayal. Thus, faced with increasing American pressure, Hanoi and the NLF had reason for their choice to fight back.

If escalation thus blocked international moves toward peace, how did it operate to strengthen the commitment of the South Vietnamese government to continue the fight? One of the justifications for U.S. escalation most often repeated by American officials is that it helps to raise the morale of the South Vietnamese. Raising morale can only mean strengthening the hand of the right-wing, hard-line forces, which were, at this time, those surrounding Thieu.

Several reports from South Vietnam have spoken of basic divisions within the South Vietnamese military, notably among left, right, and center forces. The events of the spring of 1966, notably the conflict between Thi and Ky, suggest the correctness of this analysis. We do not know how the American Embassy in Saigon operates within the battle lines of South Vietnamese politics, though we have seen reports that during every coup, American officials and officers are in contact with the leading elements.

We would suggest that every American escalation of the war has given a moral and material shot-in-the-arm to pre-
cisely those elements, namely the right-wing, in the South Vietnamese government who were committed to the fight against the Vietcong. It seems as if every time the pro-Thi and potentially neutralist forces acquired a new chess piece from the Buddhists, *e.g.*, through demonstrations, the pro-Thieu forces received, in return, a counterpiece from the United States.