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**Subject:** Second (Some New Text) AP Story Today on Vietnam Document Release  
Copyright 1997 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. The information contained in this news report may not be published, broadcast or otherwise distributed without the prior written authority of the Associated Press. By MIKE FEINSILBER Associated Press Writer WASHINGTON (AP) -- Newly declassified government documents support the theory that weeks before his assassination John F. Kennedy wanted his military leaders to draw up contingency plans for a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam following the 1964 presidential election. The documents add to the historical controversy over whether the nation might have been spared the loss of 58,000 American lives in Vietnam had Kennedy not been killed. Some historians believe that Lyndon B. Johnson, upon succeeding Kennedy, deepened the U.S. commitment out of eagerness not to be seen as the first American president to lose a war. But historian Ronald Spector of George Washington University said the execution of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem three weeks before Kennedy's murder in 1963 may have been more decisive than the change at the top of the U.S. government. American leaders soon discovered that Diem had been hiding reports from the field that showed the war was going badly for the South Vietnamese, said Spector, who teaches a course on the U.S. role in Indochina. And Diem's successors proved even more ineffective than Diem in combatting the Viet Cong. The newly released documents did not discuss Kennedy's role in sanctioning Diem's assassination -- another contentious issue from those days. The document on plans for a withdrawal was among 800 pages of Joint Chiefs of Staff records that were made public Monday by the government's Assassination Records Review Board. The board was created by Congress to amass for public inspection any records that might shed light on Kennedy's murder. "All planning will be directed towards preparing RVN (South Vietnamese) forces for the withdrawal of all U.S. special assistance units and personnel by the end of calendar year 1965," said an Oct. 4, 1963 memo from Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Taylor drafted the message for discussion by the joint chiefs. But their reaction was not reflected in the new documents. Less than a month after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson told his commanders to plan for "increased activity" against North Vietnam, another paper showed. In making such plans, Johnson directed, commanders should take into consideration "the plausibility of denial," the possibility of North Vietnamese retaliation and "other international reaction" -- all suggesting Johnson wanted to act against Hanoi surreptitiously. Historian George Herring at the University of Kentucky, author of "America's Longest War," said there was no doubt that American officials discussed a withdrawal by 1965 "but the question is whether you read this (document) as evidence whether Kennedy had made up his mind. I would say from earlier evidence that it was still up in the air." Another memo showed that

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