

SECRET

MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT  
August 28, 1963, 12:00 Noon -- Subject: Vietnam

Others present: Vice President (later), Secretary McNamara, Under Secretary Ball, Secretary Dillon, Attorney General, General Carter, General Taylor, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, Under Secretary Harriman, Ambassador Nolting, General Krulak, Director Murrow, Mr. Helms, Assistant Secretary Hilsman, Mr. Colby (CIA), Mr. Bundy, General Clifton, Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Bromley Smith

The meeting began with a briefing by Mr. Colby who read an extract from the situation report cabled from Saigon by the CIA staff chief. Mr. Colby said we had tried to clear up the confusion caused by a telegram sent commercially from an unknown person in Laguna Beach, California, to Ambassador Lodge in Saigon urging him to try to overthrow Diem. Reports had reached Washington to the effect that Diem thought this message was an instruction from the President to Lodge.

General Taylor reported on the U.S. forces in the area available to evacuate Americans in Vietnam, if required. He said 3000 to 4000 evacuees could be airlifted by U.S. forces now in Vietnam. Other U.S. forces are being moved closer to Saigon so that they can respond more quickly and move a larger number of people. Ambassador Lodge has expressed his concern that the airlift capability is inadequate. Admiral Felt is engaged now in figuring out ways of increasing the number of Americans who could be removed from dangerous areas promptly in an emergency. The airlift in Vietnam outside of Saigon is substantial. In response to a question, General Taylor said there were over 4000 Americans in Saigon, excluding the military.

General Taylor said that Vietnamese forces loyal to Diem in the Saigon area outnumbered two to one the forces we believed would follow rebel generals in the event of a coup. Outside of Saigon, the forces controlled by generals who might rebel outnumbered Diem's forces. He concluded that in the long run the forces controlled by rebel generals would outnumber forces which would remain loyal to Diem. He cautioned that a head count of troops was not all-important because a small number of tough units could control the situation even though outnumbered by less well-trained forces.

Additional material has been released as a result of this review.

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By JMB NARA, Date 9/30/94

Mr. Hilsman said that General Dinh is the key to the situation. -----  
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Ambassador Nolting said that, as he pointed out yesterday, he believed that Diem and Nhu knew of our activity with the generals.

Mr. Ball reported that Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins had suggested that we or they leak to the press the movement of the 7th Fleet to a position off Saigon. The President doubted this suggestion should be approved because our fleet movement would appear to be such obvious evidence of an intention of the U.S. to intervene militarily in Vietnam.

Secretary McNamara stated that he believed we should decide first whether we are backing the Vietnamese generals in their effort to overthrow Diem. If we are, then we should plan how to induce doubtful generals to defect. In his view, events have almost pulled us along in the last twenty-four hours.

Mr. Ball said that it would be difficult if not impossible for us to live with a situation in which Nhu was ascendant in Vietnam. He believed we had no option but to back a coup. We are already beyond the point of no return. The question is how do we make this coup effort successful.

Mr. McNamara said he believed that we should not proceed as if we were being pushed. If we decided to back a coup we should go in to win. The cables he had read from Saigon raised doubt in his mind that the coup generals could overthrow Diem. At least initially, forces loyal to Diem can overpower forces opposing him.

The President noted that both Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins had recommended that we go ahead. He did not believe we should take the position that we have to go ahead because we have gone so far already. If a coup is not in the cards, we could unload. The generals talking about a coup did not appear to be very enthusiastic.

Mr. Bundy commented on the consequences of backing off vs. the consequences of going forward. He believed we should decide today what we should do to defect the generals. Every time we act to help the rebel generals we reduce our freedom to choose between going ahead or breaking-off efforts to overthrow Diem.

Mr. Ball said that one major change which we could make would be to instruct our military officers to talk to the generals. Up to this point, we had had no contact with the coup generals except through CIA officials. Until our military officers contact the generals, several generals who we now consider doubtful would not shift to supporting the group planning to overthrow Diem.

The President commented that we had asked General Harkins twice if he approved of our going ahead in support of a coup. Both Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins say we should support the rebel generals.

In response to the President's question, Ambassador Nolting said he was surprised when he learned that General Harkins favored out supporting a coup. Further encouragement to the generals opposing Diem runs counter to our agreement on continuing economic assistance which we reached with Diem some time ago. Diem foresaw at that time a disagreement with the U.S. about how they were running the internal affairs of Vietnam. Nolting said he had grave reservations about proceeding against Diem. The good faith of the U.S. is involved. In addition, he had given personal commitments to Diem which were based on instructions sent to him from Washington when he was Ambassador. We should not support a coup in the expectation that we can get another government which we can deal with and a base on which we can win the war against the Viet Cong. Supporting a coup is bad in principle and sets a bad precedent. The alternatives he saw are three:

1. To decide to support the coup generals and help them line up a preponderance of force so that there would be a quick takeover.
2. Back off from contacts already made with dissident generals, which he admitted would be difficult to do.
3. Leave the dissident generals alone and, if they have the guts to attempt a coup, support them at that time.

Mr. Bundy called attention to the difference between gaining operational control of a coup and the present situation in which we are merely telling the generals that we understand how they feel about Diem and that we can't live with the Nhus.

Mr. Hilsman said there were some things we could do in which the U.S. hand would not show.

Mr. Ball, commenting on Ambassador Nolting's statement, said Diem had broken promises he had made to us. The actions they are taking are in violation of good faith. He was not sympathetic to the allegation that we were breaking commitments. He cited reports which indicate that Diem and his followers are taking anti-American actions. He saw the situation as follows:

1. We can't win the war against the Communists with Diem in control. The U.S. position in the eyes of the world is being badly damaged. Hence, we can't back off from our all-out opposition to Diem and Nhu.
2. If we merely let the generals proceed and then, if they fail to overthrow Diem, we have lost as well. This outcome is half-baked and no good.
3. We decide to do the job right. There is no other acceptable alternative. We must decide now to go through to a successful overthrow of Diem.

Mr. Harriman stated his agreement with the position expressed by Mr. Ball.

Secretary Dillon commented that if anything starts it will be labeled as a U.S. show from the very beginning. If we decide to back the rebel generals we must do whatever is required to be certain they succeed in overthrowing Diem.

The President said we should decide what we can do here or suggest things that can be done in the field which would maximize the chances of the rebel generals. We should ask Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins how we can build up military forces which would carry out a coup. At present, it does not look as if the coup forces could defeat Diem.

Secretary Dillon interrupted to say, "Then don't go."

The President asked the Defense Department to come up with ways of building up the anti-Diem forces in Saigon.

Mr. Hilsman said that Ambassador Lodge was asking standby authority:

[REDACTED]

1. To suspend all economic aid to the Diem government, but continue aid by giving it directly to the generals.
2. To suspend all U.S. operations in Vietnam.
3. To assist the coup generals by making U.S. military equipment available to them.
4. To make a public announcement that the U.S. was supporting the forces trying to overthrow Diem.

Secretary McNamara thought we should tell Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins:

1. Don't let a coup start if they think it can't win because we can't live with Diem if a coup attempt is made and the coup fails. He questions whether, on the basis of the forces now available to the rebel generals, a coup can succeed.
2. We need a list of actions which would be of help to the coup generals, such as ways of gaining support from now doubtful generals and the movement of U.S. fleet units.

Mr. Bundy commented that most generals favor a coup and pointed out that the U.S. controls all military assistance being given to Diem.

Mr. Harriman said that we have lost Vietnam if the coup fails. He believes we cannot win the war with the Nhus. We have lost the fight in Vietnam and must withdraw if a coup does not take place. We put Diem in power and he has doublecrossed us. Diem and his followers have betrayed us. He favored removing Nhu and felt that it was a mistake that we had not acted a long time ago. We had made a mistake in working with Nhu on the strategic hamlet plan.

Mr. Hilsman said that we can't stop the generals now and that they must go forward or die. He agreed that we cannot win the war unless Diem is removed.

In response to the President's question, Mr. Harriman said we had been winning the war with Diem because the generals were with him. The generals are defecting now because of the recent actions which Diem had taken against the Buddhists. In the present situation, the opposition to Diem can be rallied.

The President thought we should go back to Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins again, telling them that counting up the forces favoring Diem and the forces opposing Diem, it was clear that Diem held the balance of power.

Mr. Bundy said our request of Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins should be specific in that we should ask them how they evaluate the pro-Diem and anti-Diem forces. He noted that both Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins counted heavily on the caliber of the various troops.

The Attorney General expressed his concern as to whether we knew what we would do if Diem acted to destroy the coup before the generals were ready to pull it off. He noted that some people thought Diem knew already of the coup plans. Diem would know that if the coup were successful he would be finished, and, therefore, he would obviously try to break up a coup by arresting the generals before they were ready. He thought we should figure out how we could offset any action of Diem to destroy the forces opposing him.

Ambassador Nolting asked what condition Vietnam would be in if a coup is successful. He was not clear whether the resulting government would bring about stable leadership or whether the rebelling generals would be unable to agree on who should be the leader.

Mr. Hilsman said the generals could put the Vice President of Vietnam in power and govern the country the way the generals have in Korea. He acknowledged that we have little information about how the generals plan to run the country if they are successful. He expressed his strong view that Diem and Nhu would have to be exiled.

Ambassador Nolting said that only Diem can hold this fragmented country together. Possibly Diem could get Nhu and his wife to leave, but he doubted this would be possible. We should try once again to persuade Diem to remove Nhu and Madame Nhu. Ambassador Lodge had chosen not to try to do this for fear of exposing the coup generals to a sudden reaction by Diem if Diem refused to remove the Nhus.

Governor Harriman stated his disagreement. The political situation in Vietnam will blow up sometime. We have in Vietnam a situation similar to that which existed in Korea under Syngman Rhee. The political forces in Vietnam will rally quickly against Diem.

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Ambassador Nolting said that Nhu was not anti-American nor is Diem.

The President asked that the group adjourn now, to meet again at 6:00 PM.

Bromley Smith

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