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MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT
August 29, 1963, 12:00 Noon - Subject: Vietnam

Others present: Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, Secretary Dillon, General Carter, Director Murrow, Under Secretary Harriman, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, General Krulak, Ambassador Nolting, Assistant Secretary Hilsman, Mr. Helms, Mr. Bundy, General Clifton, Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Bromley Smith

Secretary Rusk reported that both Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins agreed that the war against the Viet Cong in Vietnam cannot be won under the Diem regime. General Harkins wants to try to separate the Nhus from Diem. He believes our target is more Nhu than Diem. The question for decision is whether to instruct General Harkins to back up the approaches made to the Vietnamese generals by the CIA agents. Ambassador Lodge has already told one CIA official, Mr. Phillips, to tell the Vietnamese generals that the U.S. Ambassador is behind the CIA approach. Although indicating our support of a coup, we should avoid getting committed to the details of the generals' coup planning.

Ambassador Nolting said the first question the coup generals would ask was whether they could use the U.S. helicopters now operating with the Vietnamese army.

The President asked whether anyone had any reservations about the course of action we were following. The issue was whether we should continue as we are now doing or withdraw from the present effort.

Secretary McNamara recommended that we disassociate ourselves from efforts to bring about a coup, but he did favor an attempt by General Harkins to get Diem to fire Nhu. He believed that this effort should be undertaken sometime later, i. e. two or three days later, when the coup capability of the Vietnamese generals is greater. Mr. Gilpatric agreed with this view, adding that we should confront Diem with an ultimatum expiring within a few hours so that Diem could not take counteraction against the generals in the period before they were ready to act.

Secretary McNamara said he sees no valid alternative to the Diem regime. Vice President Tho is apparently not the man to replace Diem. A military

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junta of the Vietnamese generals now planning a coup is not capable of running the Vietnamese government for very long. Therefore, a last effort should be made to persuade Diem to change his government by dismissing Nhu.

In response to the President's question as to who is running the government now, Ambassador Nolting replied that President Diem was in control and continuing to work his usual eighteen hours a day. Diem relies on Nhu for ideas. His executive officer is Thuan who is opposed to Nhu but loyal to Diem. Thuan would remain with Diem if Nhu were dismissed.

Secretary Rusk pointed out that we are dealing with Nhu who, if a coup were successful, would lose power and possibly his life. Therefore, Nhu had nothing to lose and we must recognize this fact in dealing with him. Nhu might call on the North Vietnamese to help him throw out the Americans. The U.S. should not go to Diem with a request that he fire Nhu but that the Vietnamese generals, as a prelude to a coup, demand of Diem that he dismiss Nhu.

Secretary McNamara said he favors trying to save Diem, but Ambassador Lodge appears not to support such an attempt.

Secretary Rusk said that the first phase is to remove Nhu and Madame Nhu from power. Ambassador Lodge appears to believe that there is no hope of separating Diem and Nhu.

Mr. Murrow pointed out that problems of public opinion would be simpler if the Vietnamese generals are in the posture of remaining loyal to a Diem who has dismissed the Nhus. Mr. Bundy pointed out the great difficulty of attempting a coup which resulted in Diem remaining as head of the government. He foresaw great difficulty in trying to save Diem as the figurehead of a new government.

Ambassador Nolting suggested that we inform both Diem and the Vietnamese generals that there would be no U.S. economic or political support until the changes we demanded were made. He asked that we talk to Diem directly. He predicted that Diem would not be surprised to be told by us that the Vietnamese generals also want a change in the government.

The President pointed out that if Diem says no to a change in government there would be no way in which we could withdraw our demand.

General Taylor urged that before any ultimatum was given to Diem we have a coup plan in our hip pocket. He cautioned against the U.S. getting involved in the coup planning in such a way as to prematurely commit us to an uncertain coup to be carried out by people we were uncertain about.

Secretary Rusk acknowledged that we should not get into detailed planning of a coup, but we did have a need to know whether the generals were counting on our support.

General Taylor urged that any coup plan be given to General Harkins who could say whether or not in his opinion it was militarily feasible.

The President commented that an announcement that we were cutting off U.S. aid was a bad signal. Mr. Hilsman responded that we need a U.S. signal which could be given by General Harkins and other U.S. military officers.

Mr. Bundy said that General Harkins could be instructed to tell the generals that the CIA channel is spelling out official U.S. policy. Mr. Hilsman added that reassurance by U.S. military officers to certain Vietnamese generals might persuade those generals on the fence to come over in support of a coup.

Secretary McNamara recommended that for the time being we do not give Ambassador Lodge authority to say, at a time of his choosing, that U.S. aid to Diem is stopping. Secretary Rusk said that we could wait until the generals form a government and then announce that we are transferring to them U.S. aid.

Secretary McNamara suggested that we do not announce we are cutting aid, but wait until the generals have taken over the government, we recognized the new government, and then say publicly that our aid would be continued to the new government. Mr. Bundy commented that prompt recognition of a new government and an announcement that we were continuing U.S. aid to them would convince everyone that we had been in cahoots with the Vietnamese generals.

The President said that we could announce we were suspending our aid because of the unstable conditions in Vietnam. However, this was a later action and we should decide now on the actions to be taken immediately.

Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara agreed that we should instruct General Harkins to back up the CIA and get information about coup planning. General Taylor asked that we avoid making any commitment to the generals until they had produced a coup plan acceptable to us.

The President commented that the Vietnamese generals would obviously try to get us more and more involved, recalling a comment made by Ambassador Nolting -- what was our position if we were asked whether U.S. forces were available to support the Vietnamese generals? Mr. Hilsman said our objective was merely to reassure the generals of our support. These generals want to have a bloodless coup and will not need to use U.S. equipment with the exception of possibly U.S. helicopters.

Secretary McNamara suggested we learn as much as we can about the coup plans without talking about the use of U.S. forces. Mr. Bundy added that the coup was their show and that we should stick with our plan, which was to support the Vietnamese effort.

The President raised the problem of evacuating U.S. nationals and asked whether our capability was sufficient. Secretary McNamara summarized parts of the evacuation plan, calling attention to the forces which can be brought to Saigon within ten hours. General Taylor said it was hard to describe the evacuation force as sufficient to the need, but the military is moving additional U.S. forces into areas closer to Vietnam so that they would have a capability of expanding the number of people who could be quickly evacuated.

The President summarized the agreed actions to be taken:

1. General Harkins is to be instructed to back up the CIA approaches to the Vietnamese generals.
2. Ambassador Lodge is to be authorized to announce the suspension of U.S. aid. We have to give him this authority, but we should control the timing of this announcement.
3. No announcement is to be made of the movement of U.S. forces to the area. This information will leak out in any event. We do not want the Vietnamese to conclude that we are getting in a position to intervene in Vietnam with U.S. fighting forces.

4. Ambassador Lodge is to have authority over all overt and covert operations.

Mr. Helms suggested that certain planned covert actions which would lead to a considerable amount of confusion in Vietnam would be taken only when all plans for the coup were ready. Mr. Hilsman said that a group was at work listing covert actions to be taken in the event of a military coup. The President asked that this list be made available to him this afternoon.

Secretary Rusk called attention to the high risk which is involved in the course of action we were taking. He warned that shooting of and by Americans would almost certainly be involved. Before any action is over he said that American troops would be firing their weapons and American citizens might be killed.

The President asked what approach was to be made to Diem. Secretary Rusk responded that in the cable to Ambassador Lodge we would raise the question of who should talk to Diem and when, but we would not instruct him in the next day or two to tell Diem that Nhu must go.

The President asked what we would tell Diem. Must we tell him that he must choose among firing Nhu or having us cease our aid or being faced with a military coup. Ambassador Nolting responded by pointing out that Ambassador Lodge so far had had no substantive talk with Diem. He urged that we instruct Ambassador Lodge to have a cards-down talk with Diem now. This talk would take place before we discussed a coup with the Vietnamese generals. If we proceed in this fashion, we would have nothing to hide. He said we should tell Diem that we want a new deal and that our commitments have been altered by recent events in Vietnam. If we lay it on the line with Diem, telling him that we can't continue our aid unless he changes, we, by so doing, would have the best chance of getting a stable base on which we could continue the war against the Viet Cong.

Mr. Bundy urged that we not tell Ambassador Lodge to do something he does not want to do. Secretary Rusk pointed out that if Ambassador Lodge takes this line with Diem, telling him he must change or else, the effect will be to stimulate Nhu to immediate action.

Mr. Bundy noted that Ambassador Lodge hasn't yet said anything to Diem.

Ambassador Nolting recommended that both Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins see Diem and Nhu and tell them how they have alienated the Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese military officers. The resulting situation is one which we cannot accept. Secretary Rusk disagreed with this suggestion and predicted that the sole result would be to trigger action by Nhu. We should not proceed along this line until the generals are ready to launch a coup.

The President commented that if Diem rejects our demands, there is the possibility that the generals' planning would be upset and Nhu would act against them.

Ambassador Nolting said it was not clear whether the generals want to get rid of both Nhu and Diem. He said that he believed the generals wanted to get rid of both Nhus and believed that we could live with Diem and a new government. Mr. Hilsman noted that we have already told the generals that they can keep Diem in their new government if they wished. This is a decision which is up to them.

Mr. Bundy said he had heard from Director McCone, who is not in Washington. Mr. McCone says he favors another attempt to persuade Nhu to leave. He even suggested that Mr. Colby, who knows Nhu, make this attempt. Mr. McCone wants to be certain that a coup can be brought off before we commit ourselves to supporting the generals' attempt.

Secretary Rusk repeated his view that our main target is the Nhus.

A smaller group met with the President in his office. The cables of instruction were agreed upon.

Note: The President telephoned Mr. Bundy from Hyannisport, with the result that Mr. Bundy sent a cable, Personal-Eyes Only, from the President to Ambassador Lodge, reserving ultimate decision on U.S. action. Ambassador Lodge replied the following morning, expressing his understanding of the President's reservation. Secretaries Rusk and McNamara were the only officials in the government who knew of this message and the reply (copies attached).

Bromley Smith