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HIL M. J. I. H. M. WHITE HOUSE

Memorandum of Conversation  
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DATE: August 29, 1963  
12:00 noon

SUBJECT: Viet-Nam

PARTICIPANTS: White House  
The President  
McGeorge Bundy  
Mr. Forrestal

Defense Department  
Secretary McNamara  
Mr. Gilpatric  
Gen. Maxwell Taylor  
Maj. Gen. Krulak

COPIES TO: State Department  
The Secretary  
Governor Harriman  
Mr. Hilsman  
Amb. Nolting

CIA  
Gen. Carter  
Mr. Helms

The Vice President  
Secretary of Treasury Dillon  
USIA - Mr. Edward Murrow

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The Secretary of State said that we have now had the replies from Lodge and Harkins. Both are agreed that the war cannot be won with a Diem-Nhu regime. The only point of disagreement was that Harkins thought we should make one last effort with Diem to get rid of Nhu and that Lodge felt that going to Diem would be useless and dangers for the Generals.

Ambassador Nolting expressed himself as in favor of one last try with Diem.

Mr. Hilsman expressed his opinion that going to Diem would be fruitless and cited Kattanburg's conversation with Diem as supporting evidence.

The President asked that the group focus on the principal questions. The first was the desire of the generals for reassurances that the US would support them.

Mr. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Helms said that we have in effect already done this to a certain extent citing the cable reporting Rufus Phillips' conversation with General Kim.

Mr. Helms also pointed out that a meeting was scheduled [REDACTED]

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 for 8:15 Washington time tonight. If there was any doubt of our going ahead this meeting should be stopped immediately.

The Secretary said that although we had a need to know the adequacy of the plan, we should not get directly into planning.

Mr. Hilsman asked if the Secretary was making a distinction between participating in coup planning and further reassurances to the Generals. The Secretary said that this was precisely the distinction he was making.

Ambassador Nolting intervened and asked if we intended to get so deep into engineering a coup against Diem as to, for example, use American helicopters to transport the forces of the coup Generals to Saigon.

The President said that he wanted to get back to the basic question. In the light of the cables from Lodge and Harkins, was there anyone in the EXCOM who wished to withdraw from the operation? And, secondly, what was the feeling of the EXCOM about the issue of an approach to Diem?

The Secretary of Defense said that on the first question he thought we should proceed with the operation. On the second question he agreed with Harkins that one last approach should be made to Diem. However, he thought that the approach should not be made until everything was ready for a coup attempt. Otherwise Diem might react violently and we would have no alternative. We were several days before that point.

Mr. Gilpatric agreed with the Secretary of Defense. He felt that Harkins ought to accompany Lodge in the last approach to Diem. He agreed that the attempt should be made at the very last moment.

The Secretary of Defense said that he favored one last approach to Diem because he doubted whether anyone other than Diem could run this country.

The President asked who runs it now; that it seemed to him that it was not being run very well.

Ambassador Nolting said that Diem runs the country; that Nhu is Diem's idea man; and that Thuan is a big help as chief of staff; but that Diem runs the country.

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The Secretary of State said that Diem was facing a desperate situation-- the end of his regime, possibly the end of his life and the end of his family. Diem might do something completely irrational and desperate if he was presented with an ultimatum. He might, for example, appeal to Communist North Vietnam to intervene with their divisions to help expel the Americans. If it seemed wise to make a last attempt with Diem he felt the Generals themselves might be a better vehicle, with the timing just before the coup attempt. He doubted that Lodge would succeed and an attempt by Lodge might set in train grave actions against the US and Americans.

The Secretary of Defense said the question was whether we should try to save Diem. He felt we should. The question was one of Tactics.

The Secretary of State said it was hard to separate them and cited the Kattenburg cable. In any case, an attempt should not be made until the coup was ready.

McGeorge Bundy said that the US posture would be better if the Generals made this attempt.

Ambassador Nolting said that the sanction is US support and that we were under a moral obligation to tell the Chief of State this.

The President asked whether we would really pull out of South Viet-Nam in any event.

The Secretary of State said that we must have an alternative when we present that ultimatum.

General Taylor said that we should have a good coup plan first; that he would welcome the opportunity for Harkins to get into the planning process; that we needed to know the people and their objectives.

The Secretary of State said that getting into the planning depended on how it was done. We do need to know how much they expect from us but we ought not to be too involved in the detailed planning.

The President asked about signals to the Generals and fence-sitters.

Mr. Hilsman felt that it was important that Harkins and his colleagues

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give the Generals the reassurances they desired since it was the military advisers who had the highest prestige. In addition, he felt that Lodge and Harkins ought to consider whether Harkins should not make even more discreet hints to the fence-sitters as to the American views on the situation.

The next subject for discussion was Lodge's request for permission to announce a cut-off of aid. The Secretary of State felt there was some merit in making such an announcement only after the Generals announced the formation of a new government. There was a discussion of the various aspects of the question with no clear-cut decision.

General Taylor reported on Seventh Fleet strength and steps being taken to provide necessary forces to protect Americans in Viet-Nam should they be needed.

The CIA reported on "possible jamming of Diem's radio and the provision to the Generals of radio facilities."

The President decided that we should authorize Harkins' approach to the Generals; that we should authorize Lodge to make a decision about a cut-off of aid with certain qualifications; that there should be no deliberate leak on the Seventh Fleet movements; that there should be no hint to the fence-sitting Generals on Seventh Fleet movements at this time.

The Secretary of State said that the President should understand that we could not assure him of a peaceful operation; that some Americans may have to do some shooting, if only in self-defense; and that some Americans would probably be killed in the process.

The President again raised the question of the approach to Diem.

The Secretary of State proposed a separate message to Lodge from the Secretary of State to discuss the question more thoroughly.

The President thought that without a sanction it would be just more frustration, more words and more opportunity for Diem to delay.

Ambassador Nolting said that there had been no real substantive talk with Diem; that there should be a cards-on-the-table approach to him. He felt that before we went any further on a coup d'etat we should level with Diem-- after all, we have made commitments to him. These have been altered by

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GVN actions, but we ought to say that GVN actions have altered the situation and say that we wanted a new deal. This action would risk the lives of the Generals; but it was the Generals who approached us not the other way around. He felt we must talk to Diem for doing so was the only way of getting the best government available.

Mr. Bundy expressed himself as being against this approach.

Mr. Hilsman said that we had talked to Diem--as witness both Lodge's and Kattenburg's talks--and the prospects were not hopeful.

Mr. Bundy and Mr. Hilsman agreed, however, that the discussions that had so far taken place were a rather thin discourse.

Ambassador Nolting said that we should tell Diem that we would not support the alienation of the people and the military.

The Secretary of State said that this was all right provided it was done one hour before somebody moved. Otherwise Diem might take violent and unpredictable action against Americans and the Vietnamese people.

Ambassador Nolting said that he was forced to grant this possibility to the Secretary of State, but pointed out that Harkins feels such an approach should be made.

The President asked what effect this would have on the Generals; would they not regard it as a doublecross? He felt that the views of the Generals should be considered. Do they want to keep Diem and remove only Nhu?

Ambassador Nolting said that the evidence was unclear. The Generals may well want to retain Diem.

Mr. Hilsman recalled that our approach to the Generals specified that the decision on whether or not Diem should be retained was up to them.



The Secretary of State said that he felt that the Nhuses were the main target, but

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that the decision on an approach to Diem was further down the track and this could be a subject of further discourse with the field.

At that the meeting broke up with two cables No. 272 and 279 being sent as a result.

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