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MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT
November 2, 1963 -- 9:15 AM, Subject: Vietnam

Others present: Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, Director McCone, General Taylor, General Krulak, Administrator Bell, Acting Director Wilson, Under Secretary Harriman, Assistant Secretary Hilsman, Assistant Secretary Bundy, Assistant Secretary Manning, Mr. Ray Cline (CIA), Mr. McGeorge Bundy, Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Bromley Smith

The meeting began without the President.

Secretary Rusk said the important question was how to get on with the war in Vietnam against the Viet Cong. We should send guidance from here, but we should not attempt to quarterback the formation of the new government in Saigon. It would be in our interest to have civilians in the new cabinet. Our first task is to review steps which we should now take, including the cost of such steps, so that the Vietnamese can concentrate their energies on fighting the Viet Cong. One possibility which might be investigated would be a proposal to offer amnesty to the Viet Cong soldiers, such as was done in Malaya.

Secretary McNamara wanted to know when we would announce recognition of the new government and when we would announce the resumption of aid, including payments to the Vietnamese Special Forces.

Secretary Rusk replied that we should announce here our full support of the new government, but delegate to Lodge authority to decide on the timing of the announcement of various specific decisions.

Mr. Bell asked that our first aid commitments to the new government be limited. He said we should not just turn on the aid tap but we should take the opportunity to improve our aid techniques in Vietnam.

Secretary McNamara said there was no doubt in the minds of the Vietnamese of our support. However, we should seek to avoid inflation in Vietnam which could be caused either by a psychological reaction or by an actual gap in our aid pipeline. The new government has major economic problems to face.



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By SKF NARA, Date 4/30/92

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Secretary Rusk said he believed we should recognize the new government as soon as it is formally constituted, probably on a Monday or Tuesday. We should not delay our recognition in an effort to avoid being the first country to recognize. We haven't any alibis now so we had better get on with the job in Vietnam. Mr. McGeorge Bundy added that we now have nothing to divide us either.

Secretary Rusk agreed with Mr. William Bundy on the major importance of improving relations between Vietnam and Cambodia. Both made the point that joint border patrols would be very helpful to the military effort in Vietnam by blocking the movement of supplies to the Viet Cong.

Mr. McGeorge Bundy said.....

..... With regard to what should be said about the death of Diem and Nhu, we should express our regrets. Mr. Salinger would express our regret about death by violence, but the President himself should make no statement.

Secretary Rusk felt that we would have to say something lest we be accused by cynicism about the Diem and Nhu deaths.

Secretary McNamara asked why we had to say anything. Secretary Rusk replied that we need to say nothing until the facts were known about the deaths.

Secretary McNamara said the U.S. forces moving into the Vietnam area would continue steaming ahead, but would remain out of sight off shore. These forces would serve as a deterrent to the Viet Cong who might think they saw an opportunity to attack during the period of unrest in Saigon.

At this point the President joined the meeting -- Secretary Rusk summarized his earlier comments. It would be better if several countries recognized Vietnam before we did, but we should delay if the sole reason was to avoid being the first to recognize the new government.

The President commented on the serious effect which he thought the deaths of Diem and Nhu would have here and abroad. He doubted that as Catholics the two men would have committed suicide which the rebel generals maintain. Mr. McGeorge Bundy read a cable which contained several differing versions as to how Diem and Nhu had died.

Mr. Hilsman said it was not difficult to conceive of Diem and Nhu taking their own lives, despite their Catholic religion. He described them as Asian Catholics who might have chosen to commit suicide in a spirit of "this is Armageddon."

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The President asked that a report be put together which would throw the least discredit on them and on us if, as it appeared likely, Diem and Nhu have been assassinated. We should try to confine press speculation crediting the U.S. with bringing off the coup. Our line should be that the aid pressures which we used against Diem were not for the purpose of overthrowing him, but for the purpose of putting pressure on him to come to terms in order to ensure the success of the war against the Viet Cong.

The President asked that the group reconvene that afternoon.

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Bromley Smith

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