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July 30, 1966

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. MOYERS - EYES ONLY

SUBJECT: Discussion Concerning the Diem Regime in August-October 1963

Your specific question to me concerned the celebrated cable of August 24, 1963, which in effect directed Lodge and the Mission to start exploring ways to find alternative leadership to Diem. That message is in fact more complex and perhaps less clear than that one-sentence summary. It is attached as TAB A.

According to my oral information from Michael Forrestal in mid-September (I myself was away from mid-August to mid-September), the message was cleared by phone with President Kennedy in Hyannisport, it being a Saturday night. There is a sharp difference of recollection between Mr. Forrestal and General Krulak (then in the JCS as their Vietnam man) as to whether General Taylor ever cleared the message. I believe it is agreed that Mr. Gilpatric did so by phone from his Eastern Shore farm, on the basis that the matter was essentially political. Secretaries Rusk and McNamara were both out of town and unavailable until early in the following week.

While the August 24 cable is a vital part of the story and indeed reflects a true "breakpoint" in Washington thinking, there is so much more to it that I think it would be a mistake merely to look at that cable. The prior and ensuing events were roughly as follows:

1. Lodge was nominated to Saigon in June and there began immediately to be dope stories in the press that he was going out to clean up the situation and do something about Diem. I cannot say who was responsible for those stories, but my

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By JW, NARA, Date 4-20-98

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predecessor, Mr. Hilsman, had unfortunate tendencies in this direction. Undoubtedly, Diem came to regard Lodge's arrival as a calculated challenge to him.

2. On August 18th, while Lodge was en route to Saigon, Diem and Nhu ordered the Army into the pagodas in Saigon, bringing to a flash point the simmering Buddhist crisis that had been going on since May. The timing must have been related to Lodge's arrival.

3. After a few days of back and forth trying to establish whether the Army really had been acting at all on its own, the August 24th cable was sent.

4. In the ensuing week, as the top-level outgoings attached as TAB B show, we went up the hill and down again as to the possibility of the military taking action against Diem. This was primarily a CIA operation, and I have dug out from my own files a chronology of principal CAS contacts in the whole August-October period. This is attached as TAB C. In essence, we made quiet approaches to key military men, who finally told us that they simply could not make it at that time. Undoubtedly, however, the idea that they might act, and that if they did we would support them, was planted at that time.

5. On or about September 7th, President Kennedy -- based on discussions of which I have no record or knowledge, made a press conference sharply critical of Diem. Shortly thereafter, we suspended further transactions under the Commodity Import Program, the proceeds of which were of course fundamental to the support of the Vietnamese war effort. The suspension of transactions did not at all mean that support ceased in fact, since there was a pipeline of at least 2 - 3 months already on the way.

6. By mid-September, there was acute controversy within the government, and a large and regrettable spate of newspaper leaks that pretty clearly identified the respective sides -- Hilsman and others in State believing that Diem must go, while DoD, JCS, and CIA (both in Washington and in the field) were opposed to any change. I myself

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returned from Europe on September 14, and vividly recall that Mike Forrestal came to me at once to describe the whole controversy and its background, and to say that people like myself, who had taken no emotional position, should now get into the situation fully and see if we could help straighten it out.

7. In the middle of the week of September 16th, President Kennedy chaired a small White House meeting at which it was decided that the only way to get a solid government position would be for Secretary McNamara and General Taylor to take a small and select group at once to Saigon for a hard look. I worked with Secretary McNamara in the selection of this group, which included Bill Sullivan from State, Mike Forrestal from the White House, and Bill Colby from CIA. This group left on September 23rd.

8. The McNamara/Taylor mission stayed in Vietnam through October 1st, making field trips but focusing primarily on the widest possible contact in all quarters to assess the political situation. The mission returned on October 2nd and immediately presented a full report to President Kennedy, of which I enclose my own editing copy as TAB D. The report speaks for itself. Unfortunately, its public image has always derived from the White House release of October 2nd which picked up the McNamara/Taylor prediction that it should be possible to scale down the US military effort in Vietnam by the end of 1965. However, the real guts of the report was its conclusion that Diem simply had to be drastically reformed if we were to have any hope that he could be an effective leader. This unanimous conclusion of the group solidified top-level Washington thinking that we might be forced to seek some alternative to Diem. (To the best of my recollection, the then Vice President's views were not stated in the meetings at that time, although they may well have been conveyed privately to President Kennedy, and may not have been in accord with the report and the consensus that appeared to develop from it.)

9. However, from an action standpoint, the decisions were to continue the suspension of transactions under the Commodity Import Program, for Lodge to await contact with Diem but to use any such contact to press him on reform, and that -- as to any possible military coup -- we would not actively promote such a coup, but

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would stay in close contact with military leaders who might be involved in such efforts. The last point was the subject of a careful Top Secret annex to the NSC Action Memorandum, of which I have no precise copy, although I have drafts that confirm the above statements.

10. During October, Diem refused to see Lodge until very late in the month, just prior to the actual coup. My recollection is that Lodge finally saw him in Dalat about October 27-28, and made a strong pitch for reforms, with some apparent response from Diem. However, the latter had not taken any action by the date of the coup -- November 1st.

11. With respect to contacts with the military, these were principally carried out by a CIA officer under Lodge's personal direction. They were directed to our knowing exactly what might be afoot, and the only message conveyed on the US side was that, if a change of government did take place at any time or for any reason, the US would support the new government if it were in fact effective and prepared to carry on the war. This message, while general, undoubtedly encouraged the military plotters. In the early part of the month, they seemed to be disorganized, and there seemed to be at least two or three rather feeble efforts on foot at once. However, in the last week of October, it became clear to us all from the CIA source that serious action by the group led by General Don might in fact be imminent.

12. Hence, in the two or three days prior to November 1st, there was a last series of meetings as to whether we should do anything to forestall or interrupt a coup if it did take place. We were deeply concerned as to the balance of forces in Saigon, and thought it entirely possible that a coup attempt would produce a blood bath in Saigon with no decisive result and resulting government chaos. However, we finally concluded that we did not have the leverage or the contacts to prevent a coup -- nor could we confidently take the other side and tell Diem what we knew might be brewing. Hence, in the end we stood aside, and the Don/Big Minh group did in fact carry out its coup on November 1st with great success. The element of the coup that we of course most regretted was the killing of Diem and Nhu. While we had repeatedly told the military leaders that we

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