

Memorandum for the Record of a Meeting at the White House, Washington, August 26, 1963, Noon¹

(32.16 total meeting time recorded)

SUBJECT

Vietnam

1. Present, in addition to the President, were:

Secretary Rusk	General Carter
Secretary McNamara	Mr. Helms
General Taylor	Mr. Hilsman
Mr. Ball	Mr. Bundy
Governor Harriman	Mr. Forrestal
Mr. Gilpatrick	Major General Krulak

2. Mr. Hilsman summarized the current situation concerning the execution of the plan outlined in State Cable 243,² to include the visits contemplated with Generals Khiem and Khanh.

3:25
3. The President asked if we are adequately prepared for protecting and/or evacuating U.S. citizens in Vietnam. He was shown the summary of military preparations to back up the Embassy program and was told that we have a battalion landing team at sea, 24 hours distant from Saigon now.

4:55
4. The President observed that Mr. Halberstam of the *New York Times* is actually running a political campaign; that he is wholly unobjective, reminiscent of Mr. Matthews in the Castro days. He stated that it was essential that we not permit Halberstam unduly to influence our actions.³ Mr. Hilsman assured the President that this was not the case.

6:23
5. Governor Harriman interjected the opinion that in this case we have acted at the first opportunity; that at an earlier moment we could not have accurately located the sources of strength and support.⁴

¹ Source: National Defense University, Taylor Papers, Vietnam, chap. XXIII. Top Secret; Sensitive. Drafted by Krulak. A memorandum of conversation of this meeting by Hilsman is in the Kennedy Library, Hilsman Papers, Countries, Vietnam, White House Meetings, State Memcons.

² Document 281

³ In Hilsman's record of the meeting he paraphrased the President as follows: "Halberstam was a 28-year old kid and he [the President] wanted assurances we were not giving him serious consideration in our decision."

⁴ In Hilsman's record of the meeting he reported Harriman's observations as follows:

"Governor Harriman pointed out that the decision was taken at the earliest possible moment that it could have been; that Saturday [August 24] was the first day that we knew the situation and that no such decision could ever have been taken unless the people of Viet-Nam had themselves turned against the government; i.e., the act of beating up the Pagodas swung people against the regime and that we had made our decision at the earliest possible moment after that act."

6. The President observed¹ that Diem and his brother, however repugnant in some respects, have done a great deal along the lines that we desire and, when we move to eliminate this government, it should not be a result of *New York Times* pressure.

7. General Taylor observed that there are many military difficulties involved in the execution of the plan embodied in the 243 cable; that the Vietnamese military is split three ways; that Diem is truly the focus and that we should put our first effort on him.

8. Secretary Ball raised the question of whether Diem knows the extent to which his brother is undermining him, offering as an example the thousands of his personal pictures which have been printed and displayed.

9. The President recalled that about six weeks ago Nhu had a meeting with the Generals⁶ and raised the question of whether he is trying to take over himself. Hilsman responded that Nhu is riding the fence. He continued on the Nhu subject by stating that Admiral Felt had called him, referred to various cables involved in the situation, and expressed concern as to what would happen unless the Nhus were removed. Hilsman quoted him as saying that unless the Nhus were eliminated the middle level enlisted men would soon lose their interest in fighting. Felt believed that the Generals could handle the situation but that we will have to make known our willingness to support them. Hilsman said that subsequent to this call Felt called him again and counselled against delay. He reiterated, following a query from General Taylor, that Admiral Felt had called him.⁷

10. The President asked General Taylor, in light of his experience in the Pentagon, what chance a plan such as outlined in State Cable 243 would have of succeeding. General Taylor replied that in Washington we would not turn over the problem of choosing a head of state to the military.

¹ Hilsman's record of the President's observations at this point reads:

"The President asked a number of questions about the personalities and the relationships between Khiem, Khanh, Minh, Nhu, General Don and so forth. The relative strength of the various forces in Saigon was also discussed—the impression being left that Colonel Tung's forces were the only military now present in Saigon with the exception of some Marine battalions which might in fact be loyal to Nhu."

² See Document 220.

³ In Hilsman's record, he observed: "Maxwell Taylor was visibly upset that Felt had called Hilsman and I am sure Felt will hear about it."

In JCS telegram 2219, August 26, Taylor queried Felt if Hilsman's account of these telephone conversations was accurate. (National Defense University, Taylor Papers, Vietnam, chap. XXIII) In CINCPAC telegram 262317, August 27, Felt responded that he made two calls to Hilsman on August 24. In the first he recommended U.S. support for a move by the Generals against Nhu; in the second Felt stated he did not counsel against delay, but merely asked to be included as an information recipient of appropriate telegrams on this question. (*Ibid.*, T-172-69) In JCS telegram 2253, August 27, Taylor on behalf of the Joint Chiefs reprimanded Felt for expressing his views on a substantive issue outside of proper channels. (*Ibid.*)

11:40

11. Mr. Hilsman then raised the question of whether it would be wise to have a public or a classified statement concerning the curtailment of travel. The President approved a classified approach to the problem, following Hilsman's advice that a public statement might in some way tip our hand.

13:15

12. The President asked what the Voice of America is saying on the subject, to which Mr. Hilsman replied that they were guilty of an error today when they speculated on our use of aid cuts as a sanction against the Vietnamese. He stated that this was contrary to explicit instructions that Voice of America should not become involved in speculation.

14:15

13. Mr. Rusk asked when Ambassador Lodge plans to have a business session with Diem. Hilsman had no knowledge of any planned meeting.

14:40

14. Mr. McNamara stated that a study of the problem raised these questions in his mind:

a. Exactly what Generals are we speaking of when we address the subject of a "general officers group"?

16:00

To this Hilsman replied that while we have contacted only three (Khiem, Khanh and Minh) there are others, although these three declined to name their colleagues. Mr. McNamara then expressed the view that we should query Saigon as to exactly who the loyal Generals are.

19:32

b. His second question was: what exactly do we mean in State Cable 243 by the term "direct support"?

Hilsman replied that this meant finding ways to support the Vietnamese military logistically, not using Saigon as a port of entry.

17:35

Mr. Rusk asked me if I was familiar with the geography of the area, to which I replied in the affirmative. He then asked if I believed it would be practical to provide logistical support to the military forces directly, without the use of Saigon as a logistic base. I stated that it would be extremely difficult, involving major changes in our system and equipment and would require considerable time to develop a completely new arrangement. General Taylor stated that, in any case, this idea had not been examined by the military and that he would estimate it to be a very difficult project.

Mr. McNamara concluded the discussion on this question by stating that he believed we should query our representation in Saigon and find out more on their interpretation of what the "direct support" requirement embodies.

20:41

c. Mr. McNamara's third question was what Ambassador Lodge is to say to Diem. There never really was a response to this question.

21:25

The President commented that he did not believe that Diem would let his brother be ejected from the scene. Secretary Rusk demurred from this viewpoint stating that he was not at all sure this was the case, while Mr. Hilsman said that the Country Team believes that Diem and Nhu will rise or fall together.

23:35 15. Mr. McNamara then raised the question of who Ambassador Lodge believes could replace Diem, stating that if we stand by and let a weak man get in the Presidency we will ultimately suffer. In this regard the President asked if the Foreign Minister who recently resigned³ might be a good candidate, to which Hilsman replied in the negative—stating that it is his view that the Generals would probably support Big Minh.

24:08 16. Secretary Rusk suggested that it might be possible to survive with Vice President Tho at the head, supported by a strong military junta.

24:40 17. The President asked what would happen if we find we are faced with having to live with Diem and Nhu, to which Hilsman replied this would be horrible to contemplate because of Nhu's grave emotional instability.

25:00 18. Mr. Rusk then stated that, in the broad sense, it appears that unless a major change in GVN policy can be engineered, we must actually decide whether to move our resources out or to move our troops in.

26:08 19. The President asked if we are being blamed in Vietnam for the situation, to which Hilsman responded that we may be suffering slightly but that mostly the people seem to want to get rid of the Nhus, but clearly need U.S. support to do so. He stated that, on these terms, it is imperative that we act.

26:41 20. The President stated that there should be another meeting tomorrow to discuss the matter further. Mr. McNamara stated that, as a matter of first priority, we should procure biographical sketches of the key personalities involved, following which General Taylor suggested that we should talk to Ambassador Nolting. The President agreed and stated that Nolting should be brought to the meeting tomorrow, following which Mr. Hilsman commented that Nolting's view are colored, in that he is emotionally involved in the situation. Upon hearing this, the President observed, "Maybe properly."

28:19/
30:25 21. The President then stated that the matters discussed in the room should be held very closely and that the need-to-know group should be kept in the minimum number.

V.H. Krulak
Major General, USMC

³ Vu Van Mau.