

(64:13 total meeting
time recorded)

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MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT

August 27, 1963 -- 4:00 PM, Subject: Vietnam

Others present: Secretary Rusk, Under Secretary Ball, Secretary McNamara, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, Attorney General, General Taylor, General Carter, Director Murrow, Ambassador Nolting, General Krulak, Assistant Secretary Hilsman, Mr. Helms, Mr. Colby (CIA), Mr. McGeorge Bundy, Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Bromley Smith

Before the President arrived, Secretary McNamara made four points:

1. We need to appraise the situation in Vietnam and plan our techniques.
2. We should reconstitute the Executive Committee of the National Security Council.
3. We should list the contingencies which may develop and decide what we would do if a coup d'etat fails.
4. We need ask the President for no decisions today.

When the President arrived Secretary Rusk opened the meeting by suggesting that for the immediate future it might be necessary to have daily meetings with the President and carry on an exercise comparable to that done by the NSC Executive Committee for Cuba. He asked for a report on the situation in Vietnam.

Mr. William Colby, the Vietnam expert from CIA, said that the situation in Saigon was quiet. He summarized a situation report which concluded that unrest was not apparent in the Vietnam countryside. He referred to the efforts of Foreign Minister Mau to resign and leave the country. On the operations side, Mr. Colby reported that CIA officials had interviewed two Vietnamese generals yesterday. One general said the situation for a coup was favorable and forecast that one would take place within a week. The second general gave what was described as a jumpy answer in response to the CAS initiative. Mr. Colby concluded by summarizing Ambassador Lodge's report of his talk with Nhu (see attached Saigon 346).

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Secretary Rusk commented that Lodge hasn't come to grips with the problem in Vietnam in his talks with Diem or Nhu. He may be waiting to see what the Vietnamese generals are going to do.

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Mr. Bundy asked what elections the Vietnamese government had postponed. Mr. Colby replied that the elections were similar to our Congressional elections. Ambassador Nolting said that these elections were not significant and would not change the composition of the government.

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In reply to the President's question, Nolting said that the Vietnamese generals haven't the guts of Diem or Nhu. They will not be a unified group but will be badly split. They do not have real leadership, and they do not control the predominant military force in the country. He expressed grave doubt that the generals could carry out a clean coup in a split second.

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Secretary McNamara circulated a list of the coup generals and the forces they control. He noted that these military forces were few and scattered. He also had a list of generals loyal to Diem who had forces in Saigon and near at hand which they controlled. In addition, General Tung commanded the elite corps of special forces which were loyal to Diem. He concluded by reading extracts from General Harkins' cable summarizing the disposition and loyalty of Vietnamese forces.

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In response to the President's question as to the effect of the civil disturbances on the military campaign against the Viet Cong, General Krulak replied that the effect was slight and that there had been no dramatic degradation of South Vietnamese military capability.

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Secretary Rusk commented that there had not been sufficient time for the Viet Cong to react by taking advantage of the internal disturbances. Ambassador Nolting added that the effect of the unrest was limited to the cities and had not yet affected the countryside. He said that whatever happened in the city of Saigon would have little effect in the rural areas in the long run because the peasants were uninformed and interested primarily in obtaining sufficient food. Although the unrest would be bound to seep down into the countryside, he doubted that the rural people would be affected unless their personal security is involved and unless their food supply is reduced.

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In response to the President's question as to why the peasants were not upset by Diem's attack on the Buddhists, Ambassador Nolting replied

that the Buddhists were not organized as a religion such as we have in the West. The Buddhist church in Vietnam is not a real force.

22 31 The President asked whether Diem had ever explained to us why he had not kept his promises to us. Ambassador Nolting replied that Diem had kept his promises. He said that there was no promise made to us which he had not tried to keep. Ambassador Nolting said Diem should be given "E" for effort. Diem is not a liar and is a man of integrity. In response to a question about Madame Nhu, Ambassador Nolting said Diem had disavowed Madame Nhu by means of replying to a question put to him by Marguerite Higgins of the New York Herald Tribune.

24 15 The President said that Mr. Hilsman had told him that Diem was not forthright. Mr. Hilsman referred to a Honolulu meeting with Ambassador Nolting which had left him with the impression that Diem had not carried out commitments made to Ambassador Nolting.

25 14 Ambassador Nolting read from his report of August 13th which stated that Diem had promised to be conciliatory toward the Buddhists and to remove Madame Nhu from Vietnam. Diem had asked the Australians to invite Madame Nhu to visit there. On August 12th Nhu had promised to be conciliatory in order to satisfy world public opinion even though he believed that the Buddhist movement was subversive. Diem had said that their military officers were worried by the Buddhist movement because of its possible effect on fighting the war against the Viet Cong. Ambassador Nolting said that on August 14th he thought we had won a real victory in Vietnam. He said that he was not convinced at that time that Diem's conciliatory policy would end the unrest.

27 01 The President asked whether between the 14th and the 20th of August the rioting and the unrest had changed Diem's mind or whether Diem had lied to Nolting. Nolting said he believed Diem and Nhu had changed their minds after they had talked to him on August 14th. He said they appeared to have decided to end the unrest once and for all and together they had moved from conciliation to the use of force. He said that they apparently had decided that conciliation would not pay off because the Buddhists would not cooperate with Diem after Madame Nhu had made her public attack on the Buddhists.

30 27 In response to the President's question about Madame Nhu's authority, Ambassador Nolting said that Nhu himself is an able person who

organized and is responsible for the success of the strategic hamlet program. He had been cooperative with us and was not anti-American but pro-Vietnamese. He said that both Diem and Nhu had separately denied that they were fighting each other. He predicted that Nhu would not be disloyal to his brother and throw him out, but probably the younger man, aged 54, would replace the older, who is 62. He said that Nhu was feared by the people and by the Vice President. However, he could see Nhu in a position of authority because Nhu can command people and the Vietnamese are respectful of those who can command. In his view, the Vietnamese generals had asked for martial law, Nhu had checked their request with Diem, and when the proposal was approved, Nhu ordered his secret police to arrest the Buddhists at the same time that martial law came into effect. Ambassador Nolting acknowledged that the secret police had used brutal methods but he believed they had not been ordered to do so. He felt that the secret police were jumpy and therefore resorted to greater use of force than was anticipated. Ambassador Nolting cited reports that there were 1400 Buddhists arrested and about 1000 students. He pointed out that Nhu had told Ambassador Lodge that the monks were being released quietly and returned to their pagodas.

34 12 Secretary Rusk suggested that the group turn its attention to a list of contingencies which might face us in Vietnam. He listed two. What would our position be if some generals remained loyal to Diem and some generals attempted a coup. The second dealt with what we should do if the generals attempted a coup and were defeated by Diem.

39 50 The President commented that he saw no point in trying a coup unless there was a chance of its success. He asked what military support there would be for a coup.

40 21 Ambassador Nolting replied that military support for a coup did not now exist. There might be such support if the U.S. said that the Vietnamese must get rid of Diem and Nhu. A larger number of generals would rally to a coup aimed at ousting Nhu. Most of the generals would be reluctant to oust Diem. Diem and Nhu were Siamese twins who could not be forced apart. If the generals move against Nhu, Diem would go down with him in the palace, or, if he escaped, return to Saigon to resist the rebel generals. Or Diem might quit the fight and leave the country. Ambassador Nolting said it would be impossible to engineer separation of the two men -- the only possible way would be to persuade Diem to send Nhu abroad.

43:00

Ambassador Nolting recalled that the circle had nearly been completed in a three-year period. Ambassador Durbrow had told Diem three years ago that Nhu must go. Diem refused to accept the suggestion and Durbrow was removed from Vietnam. (The President recognized the irony of this situation by smiling.) Ambassador Nolting said we should not fight the internal political situation in Vietnam too hard. He urged that we keep our eye on fighting the Viet Cong. In his view, newspaper pressure cannot clean up the messy internal politics of Vietnam which will be with us for a long time.

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The President asked whether Ambassador Nolting agreed that Diem's actions in the last few months would prevent him from carrying forward the war against the Communists. Ambassador Nolting responded that he thought we should take it slow and easy over the next several weeks. It is possible that the brutal surgical operation may succeed as Diem and Nhu have predicted. We will take our lumps because of the actions of Diem and Nhu, but if they succeed, we will have preserved a base for the fight against the Viet Cong. If the smouldering resentment of the Vietnamese people grows and begins to show up in the Vietnamese military units to such an extent that the war effort is blocked, then we have an entirely different problem of creating an acceptable political base. Ambassador Nolting called attention to the fact that the CAS agents had already told some generals to undertake a coup. If we go back on these generals now, we will lose them. He asked why we should jump unless we have some place to jump.

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The President noted that we hadn't gone so far we can't delay. He recalled that one general had said the generals needed a week to effect their plans. Recalling that the generals had asked us to give them a signal by means of broadcasting a sentence over the Voice of America, the President said we should send no signal if there is no real coup planning.

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Mr. Hilsman referred to Harkins' estimate that the generals would delay a few days until they knew the reaction of the general officers. If the general officers decided they could not live with the Diem regime, then the senior officers would move forward to a coup.

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Secretary McNamara said he believed we should ask Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins for an appraisal as to whether a coup by

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the generals can be successful. If our officials doubt that the generals can pull off a coup, then the generals should be cautioned not to move. The danger already exists that Diem and Nhu know of the generals coup planning and of U.S. interest in their plans. He believed that we could slow up the CAS action with the generals.

Mr. Hilsman said that the longer we wait the harder it would be to get Diem out.

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The President asked what General Harkins' position is. General Taylor responded that General Harkins had never been asked for his views -- that he merely got orders.

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Secretary Rusk said that in his view the crucial factor is the effect of the current unrest on the other side. Does the existing unrest make it impossible to carry out the war against the Viet Cong? If the Buddhists and the anti-Diem groups do not give up their attacks on Diem, how can the war go on? If Vietnamese opposition to Diem is great, it is very hard for us to support Diem.

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In response to the President's question, Ambassador Nolting evaluated the Vietnamese Vice President as a respected person who was neither forceful nor ambitious.

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Mr. Bundy noted that the generals did not appear very forceful. He suggested that General Harkins and Ambassador Lodge be asked to report on the exact operational situation. He believed that we should ensure that if a coup were attempted and failed, there was no evidence of U.S. interest in the attempt.

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Mr. Murrow asked whether the generals we were talking to would be able to reach an accommodation with the Buddhists. He thought we should be certain that if a coup succeeded, the resulting situation would be better than the present one.

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The President said we should send a cable to Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins asking for their estimate of the prospects of a coup by the generals. They should also be asked to recommend whether we should proceed with the generals or wait. He also wanted their views on what we should do if the situation deteriorates.

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Nolting commented that he would not be happy if the present situation calmed down and Nhu got more power. Diem must be forced to limit

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the authority of Nhu and get Madame Nhu out of the country. Diem would not respond if he were pushed, but he could be convinced by Ambassador Lodge that the situation must improve if we were to continue assisting Vietnam.

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Secretary McNamara agreed that we should obtain an immediate appraisal from the officers on the ground and should ask them whether chances of a successful coup would be increased by delay.

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The President said he thought they should also be asked whether the effect would be harmful if we decided now to cut our losses.

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Ambassador Nolting said we should try once again to persuade Diem to limit the authority of Nhu and to force the political liquidation of Madame Nhu.

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Secretary Rusk stated that we should make clear to our officials in Saigon that we were not changing their existing directive on which they had already proceeded to take numerous actions.

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The President concluded the meeting by repeating Ambassador Nolting's view that the generals interested in the coup were not good enough to bring it about.

Bromley Smith