

HIL MAN, VIETNAM, McNAMARA &

Memorandum of Conversation

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DATE: August 28, 1963
12:00 noon

TAYLOR TRIS BOX NO. 4/6

SUBJECT: Viet-Nam

White House
PARTICIPANTS: The President
McGeorge Bundy
Mr. Forrestal

Defense Department
Secretary McNamara
Gen. Maxwell Taylor
Major Gen. Victor Krulak

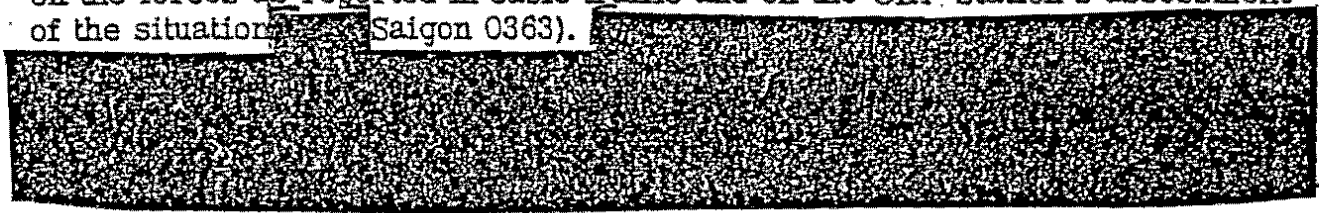
State Department
COPIES TO: Under Secretary Ball
Governor Harriman
Assistant Secretary Hilsman
Ambassador Nolting

CIA
General Carter, Deputy Director
Richard Helms, Deputy Director
for Plans
Mr. William Colby

Justice: Attorney General Kennedy USIA: Mr. Edward Murrow
The Vice President - for part of meeting

The meeting began with the CIA briefing—Saigon is quiet; military operations continue but at a lessened pace; photographs of Nhu have appeared on some public buildings; contrary to earlier information General Don is not in the hospital but at his post; the JGS statement assuming responsibility for martial law; and some GVN action to surface new Buddhist leaders, returning some Buddhists to their homes who have promised to be cooperative .

On operations, Colby noted that the meeting with Big Minh would be at 8:15 p.m. Washington time today. Colby briefed the report on the Khiem meeting; on the forces as reported in cable traffic and on the CIA Station's assessment of the situation (Saigon 0363).



General Taylor briefed on the two Seventh Fleet task forces and the state of readiness of American forces. One task force is within six hours of South Viet-Nam. The other is 24 hours behind. The Marines on Okinawa are on 24-hour alert and although the airlift is not there it too has been put on alert.

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On the question of evacuation of dependents, the Secretary of Defense reported that there were sufficient airlift under US control in South Viet-Nam to remove all American dependents. (There are 4450 dependents or civilians in the Saigon area--this excludes military personnel.) The Secretary of Defense said that we do not have military forces present to protect US people in Saigon, although, as General Taylor had said, they could be brought in very quickly.

On the Lodge-Harkins suggestion for a leak on the Seventh Fleet, the President had some doubts. On the delegation of authority to Lodge requested in his 364, as well as the question of a leak on the Seventh Fleet, decision was postponed until the situation was further clarified. The Secretary of Defense said that in his opinion we had first to decide whether to go ahead with the coup or to call it off. If the decision was to go ahead with the coup, then our problem was to make it work and to decide what actions were needed to swing more generals and forces over to the side of the coup generals. He would have been reluctant to embark on this course of action but steps have already been taken and events have forced us to go along. Thus the objective was now to win. He was not at all sure that we could win. Given the balance of forces he felt that in the first stages Diem had an excellent chance of overpowering the opposition although if it dragged on for a long enough time for the forces in the provinces to be brought up to Saigon the coup might eventually succeed. Mr. Ball said that he felt we did not have a choice of backing out; that the consequences of acquiescing in a Diem-Nhu government and accepting their actions against the Buddhists and the pagodas would be that we could not win in Viet-Nam in any case. The President said that we gave Lodge and Harkins every opportunity to recommend backing off in last night's cable, but they had replied that we should go ahead. They had said "yest" to very direct and simple questions.

Mr. Bundy said that the question that the Secretary of Defense was asking really should be worded, "What were the consequences of backing off as opposed to the consequences of going ahead. He also pointed out that our actions would affect the attitude of some of the doubtful commanders. Mr. Nolting then intervened. He said that these actions were contrary to promises that the US and President Kennedy had given to President Diem; that he personally felt a grave personal commitment; and that for the US to engineer a coup d'etat as they were doing was going back on our word. Mr. Nolting said that we had three opportunities: (1) to back off; (2) to make it work, which was engineering a coup; and (3) to let the generals do whatever they wanted to without our assistance in any way.

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With some heat Mr. Ball said that he had no sympathy with the view that we were violating our commitments. In fact, Diem and Nhu had massively violated their commitments to us and by so doing had relieved us of any commitments that we had made. He said that we must look now to the US national interest. Mr. Ball felt that we could not back off, that we could not accept what Diem and Nhu have done, that they had involved the good name and prestige of the US in these actions and that this was hurting us all over the world. On the second alternative, he felt that it was also unacceptable to let the generals go it alone. We could not win the war, in his opinion, with a Diem-Nhu government and that, therefore, we should make sure that the coup succeeded and do whatever was necessary to make it succeed. The decision had been made. If we don't do all that we can to make it work, we will have the worst of all possible worlds.

Secretary Dillon said that he had come into the act late and therefore had no opinion on whether we should have embarked on this course, but the one thing that he was clear about was that if we did decide to go ahead we must certainly do everything that was required to make it succeed.

The Secretary of Defense said that we must tell Lodge and Harkins (1) not to let the coup start unless it could succeed; (2) that from the balance of forces we felt that its chances were not very good; and (3) what could we do that might make it succeed.

The President asked Hilsman what ideas State had for swinging over the uncommitted generals, and Hilsman replied that we had a number of ideas including suitably discreet comments about the US attitude towards the Nhus to generals such as Dinh, the leaks about the presence of the Seventh Fleet and other US forces, the use of [REDACTED] and so on, and that State intended to work out with Defense and CIA some suggestions along these lines.

Hilsman also questioned the Secretary of Defense's assumption that we could prevent the coup from starting at this stage. He felt that, as we had said before in the meeting, Diem and Nhu were undoubtedly aware that coup plotting was going on and that the generals probably now had no alternative to going ahead except that of fleeing the country. The President said that he was not sure that we were in that deep. As he understood it, only two contacts by two CIA men had been made with two Vietnamese generals. This was a question we would have to look into if it was a judgment of the field that the coup would not work. He directed that Lodge and Harkins be queried about

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-4-

our concern about the balance of forces and about what we could do to make the coup work. Mr. Bundy pointed out that, as General Taylor had said earlier, it was not so much the numbers of forces but their quality. One really good battalion could probably swing it in Saigon. The important thing was what could be done about the high quality forces such as the airborne units.

The Attorney General raised the question of what Diem was going to do. He felt that we had not thought this through. Mr. Hilsman described several probable Diem-Nhu moves stressing that the most dangerous was preemptive arrest of the generals and that we could only hope that the generals were taking precautions for their own safety. (LBR should develop a paper on this.)

The discussion then turned to the question of the composition of a civilian government. Hilsman reported the generals' plans for a government headed by Vice President Tho and composed of both civilian and military leaders such as Mr. Buu, the head of the trade unions. (FE is to prepare a paper on the composition of a possible new government including both military and civilian personalities.)

Mr. Nolting again intervened saying that he profoundly felt that only Diem could hold this fragmented country together.

The President said, "Even without the Nhus?" Nolting replied that he thought President Diem could be persuaded to remove Madame Nhu from the scene and at least to make botherer Nhu less conspicuous

Mr. Ball said emphatically that he disagreed with Mr. Nolting's estimate-- that attempting to go along with Diem and Nhu spelled nothing but disaster.

With some heat Mr. Harriman said that he had disagreed with Mr. Nolting from the beginning when he first assumed office as Assistant Secretary; that he felt he was profoundly wrong about this; and that he was sorry to have to be so blunt about saying this.

Mr. Hilsman said that he wished to associate himself with Mr. Ball and Mr. Harriman; that ~~the history of the past six days~~ he felt given the history of the past few days a Diem-Nhu government could not in the long run win. Furthermore, looking to the other countries in this area, he wanted to point out that the consequences of the US acquiescing in the continuation of Nhu in a

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3

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-5-

commanding position and acceptance of the desecration of the temples would make our task more difficult through Asia. He thought the President would be interested to know that the Koreans had ordered a special study of US-South Viet-Nam relations in order to decide how much repression the US would tolerate, to serve as a guide for Korean actions in the upcoming elections.

The meeting then broke up with Secretary McNamara, Governor Harriman, Mr. Bundy, Mr. Forrestal and Mr. Hilsman constituting a drafting committee for the outgoing cable.

It was a decision in the meeting that the EXCOM constituted during the Cuban crisis will function again and daily.

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