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TOP SECRET

MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT
October 29, 1963, 4:20 PM, Subject: Vietnam

Others present: Vice President, Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, Attorney General, Director McCone, General Taylor, General Krulak, Under Secretary Harriman, Mr. Alexis Johnson, Mr. William Bundy, Mr. Helms, Mr. Mendenhall (State), Mr. Colby (CIA), Mr. Bundy, Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Bromley Smith

Mr. Colby of CIA gave the current status of coup forces. He estimated that the pro-Diem and anti-Diem forces were about even, approximately 9800 on each side, with 18,000 listed as neutral. The briefing was illustrated with a CIA order of battle map.

The President asked what Diem had learned from the attempted coup in 1960. Mr. Colby replied that Diem now had much better communications with military forces deployed outside Saigon. He could thus call into Saigon rapidly loyal forces to oppose rebel forces in the city. The 1960 coup was frustrated when forces outside Saigon remained loyal, moved into Saigon, and defeated the forces which had surrounded the palace.

Mr. McGeorge Bundy suggested that the assessment just given the group be sent to Saigon to see if our officials there agreed with it. He asked whether Ambassador Lodge should return to Washington now and mentioned that some of those present felt he should stay in Saigon.

Secretary Rusk said we must assume that Diem and Nhu have heard rumors about a coup. The question for us is whether we think there is enough prospect of a successful coup to make the decision to keep silent. Should we let the coup generals know that a protracted civil war must not be the result of their efforts to overthrow Diem? Should we tell them we would support them only if the coup is short and bloodless? If fighting between the two sides takes place, each will ask for our help. If we support Diem, then we will disrupt the war effort because we will be acting against those generals who are now fighting the war against the Viet Cong. If we support the rebel generals, then we will have to guarantee that they are successful in overthrowing the Diem government.

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Ambassador Lodge was asked by General Don to stick to his departure plan so Lodge should go as he had planned. We now have little information. We need 48, not 4, hours advance notice of any coup. We should put our faith in no one, including General Don. We should caution the generals that they must have the situation in hand before they launch a coup. We should tell them we have no interest whatsoever in a long civil war in South Vietnam.

The President agreed that Ambassador Lodge should leave Saigon for Washington as he had planned. He thought the rebel generals should talk to General Harkins. He said the odds were against a coup. He suggested that General Harkins be put in charge of our mission in Saigon when Ambassador Lodge leaves. If Ambassador Lodge delays his departure, Diem will know we are aware of coup plans. It would be good to have Ambassador Lodge out of the country when a coup takes place.

Regarding the estimate that the pro- and anti-Diem forces are evenly balanced, the President commented that it always looks this way until the coup actually begins. Then support for the coup is forthcoming, as was apparent, for example, in Korea.

General Taylor cautioned against looking at the Vietnam situation as if it were a football game. He said a few key people are crucial to the success of a coup and are more important than total numbers.

The President asked that we try to find out who these key people are.

Secretary McNamara asked who of our officials in Saigon are in charge of the coup planning. He suggested that the Deputy Chief of Mission, Truehart, the Acting Chief of CIA, Smith, and General Harkins form a group which would (a) jointly decide on what our agent Conein would say and do, and (b) hear all of Conein's reports. If any of the three disagree, a report would be sent back to Washington at once. General Harkins may not know what the Embassy and CIA are now doing. Truehart should head the Vietnamese country team until the coup was initiated. At that time, General Harkins would take over with Truehart becoming his political adviser.

Director McCone did not agree that a troika should be set up in Saigon. He said it would be better for the CIA officer to take direction rather than participate in a decision-making group.

The Attorney General, acknowledging that he had not seen all of the reports, said that in his opinion the present situation makes no sense to him on the face of it. The situation in Vietnam is not comparable to that in Iraq or in a South American country where a coup could be brought off promptly. The situation now is no different than that of four months ago when the generals were not able to organize a coup. To support a coup would be putting the future of Vietnam and in fact all of Southeast Asia in the hands of one man not now known to us. Diem will not run from a fight or quit under pressure. A failure of a coup risks so much. The reports we have are very thin and the information about the assets which the rebel generals have at their command is limited. We have a right to know what the rebel generals are planning. We can't go half way. If the coup fails, Diem will throw us out. If we send out the draft cable as it stands, it will appear that we are in favor of a coup and only want more information. "My view is the minority view."

Secretary Rusk replied that if we say we are not for a coup, then the coup-minded military leaders will turn against us and the war effort will drop off rapidly.

General Taylor said he agreed with the Attorney General. When pressed by the President, General Taylor said that even a successful coup would slow down the war effort because the new central government would be inexperienced. In addition, all of the province chiefs appointed by Diem would probably be replaced by a new government.

Director McCone said he agreed with General Taylor. The failure of a coup would be a disaster and a successful coup would have a harmful effect on the war effort.

The President asked General Taylor why all the province chiefs would be replaced. He replied that as Diem appointees they would be loyal to Diem, and, therefore, not trusted by the rebel generals who had overthrown Diem.

Secretary Rusk said the important question was whether the rebel generals could achieve quick success. He felt that in the long run, if the Diem government continued, the war effort would go down hill.

Mr. Harriman said it was clear that in Vietnam there was less and less enthusiasm for Diem. We cannot predict that the rebel generals

can overthrow the Diem government, but Diem cannot carry the country to victory over the Viet Cong. With the passage of time, our objectives in Vietnam will become more and more difficult to achieve with Diem in control.

The President said it appears that the pro- and anti-Diem military forces are about equal. If this is so, any attempt to engineer a coup is silly. If Lodge agrees with this point of view, then we should instruct him to discourage a coup.

Mr. McGeorge Bundy said the most unfortunate development would be a three-day civil war in Saigon. The time remaining for us to instruct Lodge is very short. If a military plane were sent to pick up Lodge, the Ambassador could stay longer in Vietnam during the uncertain days immediately ahead.

Secretary McNamara thought that we ought to leave it up to Ambassador Lodge when he would leave Saigon for Washington. In commenting on the draft cable, he said he thought Lodge would read it as a change of signals. Lodge now believes that he is not to thwart a coup. The draft instructs him to call in General Harkins, which would be difficult to do in view of the fact that Lodge is not now keeping General Harkins informed of developments. The Ambassador should be given an option to delay his return if he wishes.

The President asked what were Lodge's existing instructions. In reply, Secretary Rusk read a paragraph from the October 5 telegram.

The President agreed to ask Lodge what he thought he ought to do about returning to Washington. Mr. McGeorge Bundy said the working group would rewrite the draft cable.

Bromley Smith