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Thomas L. Hughes notes of conversations with Mike Forrestal and Roger Hilsman during August 24-28, 1963, coup planning week. The following notes are exact copies of my originals, except where later comments are indicated in brackets.

- (1) Long lunch with Forrestal (previously scheduled) for Saturday noon, Aug. 24, at the White House. 12 noon to 2 p.m. He began by saying that JFK was delighted with the INR paper on the Buddhists and Diem written Wednesday morning, August 21. "The CIA has finally produced its counterpart paper three days late. This is impressive. We are very grateful. Timing is everything," MF said.

We began by talking about non-Vietnam issues which included: CIA's special interest in Formosa (McCone and Cline, Chiang Kai-Shek). Korea (Gen. Pat Carter and Kim Chong Pil.) Ball's trip to Pakistan. Bill Brubeck's absence ("he ran away") from Washington just after taking his job on Africa. Mike complained about getting all his African questions). Also handling Sino-Soviet affairs. Mike wanted a quick paper on what the Malaysian elections were really like in Sarawak and north Borneo. Mike also wanted a paper on the current Indonesian economic situation before mid-September when AID bills come up again.

Ironically Mike was tormented with signing off on African questions because of Brubeck's absence. As if he were asking a history-laden question, he worried out loud: "I have to ask myself: Who is away from town? Is it safe to sign cables today?"

- (2) Vietnam took up most of the conversation. Mike stressed that there was not much value in INR doing speculative pieces on SVN, on who is doing what to whom, "since it is a disintegrating situation and speculation may not make any difference."

Frequent references to JFK, his current thinking and action. (Mike clearly implied he was in direct touch with JFK, could reach him at any time, aware of JFK's private communications to and from Lodge, and of JFK's political requirements.) *✓ familiar with*

Mike suggested that INR should maintain liaison with outside civilian experts on SVN, including American Friends of Vietnam. TLH said he would call them in for discussion. (Note: I did so the following weekend in INR. Wesley Fishel and Gil Jonas met with Lou Sarris and Allen Whiting the following Saturday, August 31).

"Perhaps INR should also be a kind of high level refugee debriefing center for the gradual gathering in Washington of newly exiled ambassadors from Vietnam. The SVN amb. to Japan may resign and come here from Paris where he is. They come and see the press, Mansfield, others in Congress. This creates more headaches for the Administration on the Hill, has effects on AID, etc. These gentlemen may not be important at all to the successor government. They may create new anti-policy pressures for JFK, and even get in the way of the formation of a new SVN government. We don't want them to divert our attention from the real task. If INR debriefed them, JFK could say we had talked to them when the inevitable Congressional inquiries come."

But MF quickly said INR had a more important role to play than this. The question of an alternative government is now on the table. INR should work on this, and put together a new civilian government or a military-civilian government. Need assessments of potential leaders.

INR should backstop Roger Hilsman, of course, but "you are not the tail to his kite there anyway." Mike was critical of weaknesses in FE (Hilsman's bureau). He spoke highly of Bell and Bob Barnett, but deprecated others. Mike hoped Roger would shake up the bureau soon.

Mike was also critical of Roger's draft instructions to Lodge. "They were terrible! Imagine sitting out in Saigon with Buddhists in your garden and refugees and demonstrators outside your house, and you get an instruction from us saying 'press Diem for liberal reforms'."

Mike was also critical of CAS reporting on Nhu's conversation of Thursday. Mike couldn't see why anyone took it as anything more than Nhu's description of what he wanted us to hear for the first 24 hours (Buddhist crisis). "It served its purpose well, complete with the utterly erroneous CAS comment which has now been retracted and changed overnight from 'I do not have the impression Nhu was a central or important participant' to 'the impression was given that he was not a central or important participant.'"

Mike also mentioned the dangerous unreliability of CIA in Colby's message containing CAS views 22 August. Contrary to prior CAS assessments, they now said: "Hope for a civilian government to replace Diem is possibly unrealistic. The Tho solution is improbable. It would appear that it will be either Diem or a military junta. The CAS view continues to be that we should seek some improved continuation of Diem's adm. for at least 12 more months to allow for the consolidation of military campaigns against the Viet Cong." Mike and Hilsman agree that "another 12 months of Diem is absurd."

Mike said it was clear that the Ngo family must go; that even if they 'stabilize' for a few weeks, it can't last; that this stability itself would be more and more anti-American; that we were worse off with them staying than with them going no matter what; that we can't separate the Nhus from Diem, unless the Nhus could be 'translated somehow'. Even if left alone and "untranslated", Diem would not be up to the task. (TLH: translated presumably means exiled.)

On Harriman: Mike, who is Harriman's foster son, said (somewhat astonishingly) that Harriman had accused Forrestal of "conducting psychological warfare against the Diem regime, but he has come around this morning." Harriman signed off on Hilsman's long draft instruction for Lodge, which included a reference to eliminating the Nhus. Ball cut the Hilsman telegram down to 1/3 its original size, and solicited Lodge's suggestions; no instructions."

✕ But by far the most interesting were Mike's remarks about JFK.

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"All this is part of JFK's game with Lodge. It is implicit in the blame-sharing ploy involved in JFK's appointment of Lodge to begin with." Mike said explicitly that Lodge was hoping for instructions which he could use, refuse, or complain about later. JFK has been determined to wait for Lodge's suggestions. Hence the Ball revisions of Hilsman's long draft, although Ball is not necessarily privy to the latest Lodge-JFK private communications. The implication is that Mike is.

I then said I was a bit perplexed about where Vietnam policy was being made at the moment. I asked about the respective roles of himself, Hilsman, Harriman, Ball, Rusk, and JFK.

I mentioned that Rusk had called me from New York this morning to inquire what we knew about the French role in the Vietnam crisis. De Gaulle, whom Mac Bundy calls "nosey Charlie", was on his mind. Mike said that the Buddhist uprising was not really the long arm of De Gaulle, whose historical reputation was surely going to be enhanced by the attention his enemies like Rusk pay to him. Mike then added on Rusk: "Of all the things to think of on vacation in New York. Maybe the crisis will be over before he gets back. Can't it work out that way?"

Having criticized everybody else – Hilsman, Harriman, Ball, Rusk—for one thing or another, Mike seemed to want me to conclude that he and JFK were the two who were making policy. This may in fact be the case. (TLH note later: this may have added to the bitterness JFK expressed to MF a few days later when he furiously refused MF resignation. "You better stick around. You owe me one." Within days, Bobby Kennedy was blaming Mike as the chief coup-plotter).

X Query: what do we know about the recent private Lodge-JFK exchanges.? Who else is in the loop?

Sunday, Aug. 25, 1963: TLH rode in to work with Roger Hilsman at 10:00 a.m. He briefed me on eyes only instruction to Lodge, cleared with Ball, Harriman, Forrestal, Rusk, Taylor, and Helms. ("Helms is 1000% enthusiastic. High time we bit the bullet.")

RH: "Lodge came back this morning, 12 hours in advance of his scheduled appt. with Diem, saying he felt our objectives could not be carried out via Diem. Chances of Diem's agreement were nil. Therefore he asked modifications permitting him to go directly to generals with the main message remaining the same. Roger drafted outgoing message approving the modifications."

Taylor furious that Adm. Felt phoned Roger directly. Nolting in a state of shock and opposing policy. Roger keeps saying; "I told Eleanor that this week would separate the men from the boys." Secretary Rusk is a man. Rusk asks Roger: "Is there any wavering in our instructions?" "No sir." "Very well, I just wanted to be sure there was no wavering."

Monday August 26. Colby is flying out to brief McCone in California and get him aboard the telegram. Helms, who cleared it, is supportive. But Gen. Carter

is wringing his hands and tells Hilsman: "If this doesn't come off, I suppose everyone will blame the CIA." Roger replies: "Of course, the policy is perfect, but the implementation is in your hands. "

Roger is upset about the army, his father's profession. Taylor is fretting. Harkins revising his views. JCS claims subterfuge. As Forrestal puts it, "What is it about that place on the Hudson that trains men not to act?" Nolting is lecturing at the War College and lobbying for Diem all over town.

Wednesday, August 28. Altercation at meeting with JFK. Harkins telegram prompted by Taylor; JFK took Taylor into Oval office and read the riot act to him, forcing him to send out another telegram saying the Administration was united. Taylor chastised, and left the meeting. Consternation.

Sunday people thought a great decision had been made, more speedily than ever before in Washington. But are they kidding themselves? Much unrest from JFK on down. He keeps saying that he hopes that "Halberstam and the NY Times have not taken us in. Halberstam's just a 28 year old kid."

The devil is in the details, of course. Lodge is now in a strong position: (1) VOA broadcast, his protest, Rusk's abject apology; (2) the Washington retraction of the broadcast rather than any statement that it was unauthorized; (3) the State Dept. briefings pointing the finger at Nhu and the police, and exculpating the army; (4) the GVN reply taking specific issue with the Dept. briefings, and denouncing them as inaccurate. Lodge can claim credit if the coup succeeds; he has more than enough room to blame Washington if it fails.



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