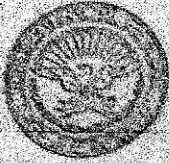


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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.



THE JOINT STAFF

OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR
COUNTERINSURGENCY AND SPECIAL ACTIVITIES

27 August 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Subject: Meeting at the White House, 1600, 27
August 1963; Subject: Vietnam

Present:	The President	Mr. Colby
	Secretary Rusk	Mr. Hilsman
	Secretary McNamara	Mr. Gilpatric
	General Taylor	Ambassador Nolting
	Mr. Ball	Mr. Forrestal
	General Carter	Mr. Murrow
	Mr. Helms	Major General Krulak
	The Attorney General	

1. Prior to the meeting Mr. McNamara and Mr. Rusk discussed possible additional questions which might be posed to General Harkins relating to the strength and orientation of Vietnamese military forces around Saigon.

2. Following the arrival of the President, Mr. Rusk proposed that there should be frequent meetings on this subject until a break is seen; - something on the order of the Executive Committee arrangement followed during the Cuba Crisis.

3. Mr. Colby outlined the situation as it exists in Saigon now, and as it has been reported in messages which have arrived in the past 24 hours. He dwelt on the visit to the two generals yesterday and upon their reactions, particularly as described in CIA Saigon Cable 0346. He reported that the Ambassador had had a conversation with Counsellor Nhu during which Ambassador Lodge expressed general dissatisfaction with affairs in Saigon, while Mr. Nhu expressed dissatisfaction with reports of US attitudes emanating from the United States.

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4. The President then asked Ambassador Nolting a long series of questions, beginning with query as to his knowledge of the generals who are said to be involved in the coup activities. Nolting replied that he was familiar with them and, in response to another direct question, asserted that in his view they do not have the courage to make a successful coup; neither do they // have the preponderance of forces nor the leadership required.

5. The President asked for a run-down of the generals in the Saigon area who have command of troops. Mr. Colby began a discussion of them, which was supplemented by Mr. McNamara who analyzed each of the generals mentioned in the coup discussion, as well as those who are on the fence and those on the other side, generally as presented in General Harkins' cable to the JCS.

6. The President asked what we know about the effect of the current activities in Saigon on the campaign in the countryside. I stated that friendly operations have diminished, both in the large scale and as to small scale efforts, but the reduction was not as yet great; that Viet Cong operations are continuing at the low level to which they had dropped after the Geneva Accords offensive.

7. The President asked if the low level of Viet Cong activity was due to the weather, to which I replied in the negative; saying that it was more likely a period of replenishment after the Geneva Accords activity.

8. Mr. Nolting agreed with the above, stating that current political activity in Saigon will probably have little effect on the countryside; that the Vietnamese peasants are uninformed, thinking mostly about crops and the price of rice. He stated that he had made visits to two villages just before departing and saw evidence of political unrest, or reflection of the metropolitan Buddhist trouble. He stated that it was his guess that the trouble will not seep down into the countryside.

9. The President asked why, since the bulk of the countrymen are Buddhists, they are not angered by what is going on. Mr. Nolting replied that the Buddhists are not well organized; that local occurrences do not have nation-wide resonance and that many of the provincial bonzes have no interest in the Saigon problem.

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10. The President asked why, in Nolting's view, did the government move in so harshly on the Buddhists. Nolting's response was that the government was anxious to stamp out calls of what it considered dangerous anti-government political activity. He stated that the political orientation of the Buddhist problem became more and more evident as time went on, until the point arrived when there was real concern in the Palace concerning possible overthrow of the government.

11. The President asked if Diem and Nhu had done what we asked them to regarding conciliating the Buddhists. Nolting replied that, to his knowledge, every promise Diem made was carried out to the best of his ability; that he is not a liar but a man of integrity. In this regard, he observed that on 14 August Diem agreed to the Ambassador's urging that he do something to repudiate Madame Nhu; which he did publicly in his response to questions posed by Marguerite Higgins. (There followed inconclusive discussion as to how public this had been in Saigon.)

12. The President asked Mr. Hilsman what motivated his statement that Diem was not frank with the Ambassador. Before Hilsman could answer this question, Nolting continued his comments, aimed at exhibiting that Diem had stood behind his promise to repudiate his sister-in-law, recounting that Diem had asked the Australian Ambassador to procure her an invitation to visit Australia.

13. Turning to the matter of Nhu, Nolting stated that, on 12 August, Nhu advised him that he was urging greater conciliation of the Buddhists, because of the adverse public opinion in the US and the GVN. Nhu felt that the Viet Cong and Cambodians would take a growing hand in the issue, that press misrepresentation would grow, and that the government was forced to pursue increased conciliation. Nolting quoted Diem as saying that the military was anxious to put down the Buddhist problem because of their fear that it might affect the war adversely. As to his own opinion, Nolting stated that he was not sure that conciliation would work, but that he knew that repression would not.

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14. Mr. Rusk asked Nolting if, in his thinking, he linked Diem and Nhu indissolubly, or if he felt they could be treated separately. Nolting stated that he was obliged to link them together. In this regard, Nolting credited Nhu with having changed his mind, and then coming round to support it - probably only to see if it would pay off. In retrospect, it appears that he concluded that it would not.

15. The President asked just what Nhu had done in helping to carry our programs forward. Nolting answered that he has a good organizational ability and has brought together the inter-ministerial committee which has made the strategic hamlet-program work. In response to a question from the President, Nolting stated that Nhu is not anti-US, but pro-Vietnam.

16. The President then asked if Nhu is desirous of taking over the government, to which Nolting replied that both Nhu and Diem deny this; that, in his view, Nhu is not a schizophrenic nor is he a liar; that he will not be disloyal to his brother; that they may well have agreed more or less to change places; that Nhu is more feared than unpopular. The President asked if the Army would serve under Nhu as President. It was Nolting's view that they would; that what counts is vigor, authority and ability to command. He stated that he believed, when martial law was established, that Nhu chose this as the time to arrest the Buddhist agitators; that he probably did not order the brutality himself but that it was a natural outgrowth of the police action. Nolting responded to another question by the President by saying that about 1,400 Buddhists were arrested, but that some had been released.

17. Mr. Rusk stated that he felt that various alternatives, in terms of what may happen in the future and our responsive actions, must be determined. To this the President responded that it was his view that a coup should not be attempted if its chance of success is slim and then asked if the list of generals we have could make a coup succeed. To this Mr. Nolting replied that he did not believe so.

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18. Mr. Rusk asked if there is any difference in coup estimates, in terms of a coup against Nhu and a coup against Diem. Ambassador Nolting stated that far more would go against Nhu than against Diem. In response to a question from the President, however, Nolting stated that Diem would not stay without Nhu; that they are Siamese twins. He stated that the only way to split them would be to persuade Diem to send Nhu away as an Ambassador - as well as Madame Nhu. In this regard he recalled that Ambassador Durbrow had made such a proposal and was unable to make it stick. The President asked Mr. Nolting what he recommended. Nolting replied he did not know; that he felt we are in a bad situation; that first we should put our major effort on fighting the Viet Cong and not on internal politics; that we should acknowledge the pressure we could get from the press but face the fact that we cannot clean up the internal situation of the GVN.

19. The President asked if the efforts of this summer, respecting the Buddhists and repressions, have precluded our participating further, and in the same way, in the campaign against the Viet Cong. Nolting responded that in his view we should take it slow for the next few weeks and see if the brutal surgery against the Buddhists has worked; take our lumps in the press but preserve our base of operations in Vietnam. He continued that if a great deal of resentment - similar to that of the students - shows up in military units and the situation seems bleak, then we will have another problem. He concluded by saying that if we have no good place to jump to we should not jump.

20. -The President asked if, having proceeded this far, we could not turn back; saying that there is no point in putting out a signal on the Voice of America if success is not there.

21. Mr. Hilsman stated that certain activities are already under way, and referred those present to General Harkins' cable for an answer to the President's question.

22. Mr. McNamara stated that we must ask Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins to appraise the measure of success; if they are not sanguine, they should caution the military leaders involved to go slowly. He observed that the great danger now is that Nhu may already know what is going on.

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23. Mr. Hilsman stated that he feels Nhu has been apprehensive of this sort of a development for over a month. He warned that Nhu probably has in mind successive phases of his plot and may well implement the next phase at any time, if he is not forestalled.

24. The President asked directly whether General Harkins supports this coup plan, to which Hilsman said yes, and General Taylor said that Harkins has been told what to do and is complying. //

25. Mr. Rusk expressed concern about the countryside, expressing fear that the unrest may pass directly to the people. He stated that if the problem means so much to Buddhists elsewhere then it must ultimately come to mean much to the Vietnamese, too. He added that we should get an evaluation of the possibility of the survival of our programs with Diem and Nhu.

26. The President asked for comments on Vice President Tho, to which Nolting responded that he was a gentleman, a good administrator, down to earth, but neither forceful nor ambitious. Mr. Rusk asked if he would go well on top of a group of vigorous generals, to which Mr. Bundy responded that vigorous generals are what we are lacking.

27. The President then directed that a cable be prepared which asked for an appraisal of the prospects of success and the influence of a delay; specifically, do Lodge and Harkins recommend waiting to see if the situation shows signs of disintegrating.

28. Mr. McNamara expressed it in terms of an appraisal of potential success of a coup now and comments on whether a delay would improve the chances. The President added the question of protecting those in contact should be brought up, too. Mr. Bundy offered a possible fourth point involving an additional try with Diem to get him to curtail Nhu and his wife.

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29. Secretary Rusk observed that the query should take its departure from the Saturday cable. The President concurred, but stated that it should make direct reference to the plans which have been outlined in subsequent cables which we have received to date.

V. H. Krulak
V. H. KRULAK
Major General, USMC



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