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OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR
COUNTERINSURGENCY AND SPECIAL ACTIVITIES

Mr

28 August 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Subject: Meeting at the White House, 1200,
28 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	

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1. Mr. Colby described the Saigon situation as generally unchanged, with minor troop movements in the Saigon area, relaxation of restrictions and some release of prisoners. In the hinterland there has been a slow drop in the offensive operations, but not dramatically so. The GVN released a statement by the Joint General Staff that the military did participate in the pagoda raids and the GVN seems to be actively engaged in generating favorable statements from the Buddhists.

2. He described Ambassador Lodge's response to the State query regarding the situation and mentioned President Diem's dissatisfaction with a telegram that he had received from Laguna Beach, purportedly from President Kennedy, urging replacement of the Diem government. The President asked how this could be explained, to which Mr. Helms replied that the Station Chief could handle it easily.

3. Mr. Colby discussed the matter of the balance of forces in the Saigon area, reciting the content of messages which all present had on the subject. He was emphatic in stating that the point of no return had been reached.

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4. General Taylor discussed the matter of military capabilities for protection and evacuation, referring to Ambassador Lodge's question as to the adequacy of US military forces in the region. He pointed out that the reaction time of the BLT task group offshore had been reduced from 48 to 24 hours; that the shipping involved could readily lift several thousand evacuees and the people could be moved much closer to the coast. He discussed the location of the CVA task group and stated that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had asked Admiral Felt what further changes are required in response to the concern expressed by Ambassador Lodge. General Taylor continued, noting that there were 4 BLTs on Okinawa on 24-hour alert; that C-130 aircraft were in the process of being assembled at Okinawa, and that all related plans were being reviewed.

5. Mr. McNamara added that a most important asset is the helicopters and C-123s already in-country, which could be used to move refugees either into the countryside or to ships at sea. He commented that the US forces present in Vietnam are of neither the type nor the size which warranted consideration for participation in large scale fighting.

6. The President raised the question of the Embassy evacuation plan, to which Ambassador Nolting replied that it had been recently brought up to date and re-organized. General Taylor, from his notes, recited key parts of the plan.

7. Mr. Bundy asked for some form of estimate of the loyal forces in the Saigon area. General Taylor replied that the forces loyal to Diem may outnumber the coup forces by two to one; on the other hand, forces more remote from the capital are weighted heavily on the side of the generals identified with the coup. He noted that two key forces in the Saigon area are the airborne and marines. He stated that orientation of these could tip the balance. He made the point that, in any case, numbers are less important than capabilities and resolution, and that one or two good units could swing the balance either way. He pointed out that General Dinh may well be the key and, if corruptible, he should be corrupted. Mr. Hilsman stated that we have plans in

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this regard, combining pressures and CIA action. The President asked Hilsman just what things he was thinking of, to which Hilsman replied that the Agency has various ideas; that there may come a stage when the prestige of our military advisors may be just the influence required, such as a conversation with General Dinh by General Timmes.

8. Mr. Bundy suggested that a possible psychological action, and one which might have a good effect, would be to send a series of telegrams from Laguna Beach similar to the one already sent. The President reacted favorably to this suggestion. He then asked Mr. McNamara what he thought we should say to Ambassador Lodge at this juncture. Mr. Ball interjected that, among other things, we should pursue the idea of a leak concerning the Seventh Fleet activities in Saigon, feeling that this is more likely to pacify than to stimulate trouble. The President asked if this leak would be in terms of the forces being assembled for evacuation, to which Mr. Hilsman replied in the negative; that the leak should be related to combatant purposes.

9. The President was not enthusiastic about this suggestion, stating that it seems to be an obvious tip.

10. Mr. McNamara stated that, in his view, there is a basic question: specifically, are we going to back the operation all the way? If so, he feels there is much we can do if we actually desire to control events.

11. Mr. Ball stated that, in his view, there is no option but to support a change which will eliminate the Nhus; that things have now gone a very long way and that the problem is how to make the action work.

12. Mr. McNamara stated that he was reluctant to follow this line of reasoning, but that events of the past night have undoubtedly pushed us far down the road. In this connection, the President stated that last night's cable asked the people on the ground for their views regarding success of the enterprise. They responded favorably; however, this does not take the matter out of our own control. He expressed the view

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that things are never out of hand until they happen; that he does not believe that we have to pursue this course on the basis of being forced to do so; that our decision should be based on reason and not compulsion.

13. Mr. Bundy stated that we must evaluate the consequences both of pursuing the current course of action completely and of withdrawing from it. He added that he believed we should decide today whether to proceed to encourage the current effort. Mr. Ball stated we should proceed carefully to determine what kinds of action we might use, noting that some of them, such as the use of our military personnel to convey our desires, might further commit us. He noted that up until now no contact had been made except through CIA; but now we must decide whether the US military should speak.

14. General Taylor stated that an important point is to know where Big Minh stands; that we do not know this yet but should by tomorrow.

15. The President observed that we have asked General Harkins twice on the matter of success of the program and commented that if there had been any ambivalence it would probably have shown up by now. He asked Nolting if he was surprised at General Harkins' reaction, to which Nolting replied that he was. He stated that one of the things that worries him is that encouraging the coup runs counter to the agreement under which we increased US assistance. This situation was foreseen by Diem who was fearful that we would become dissatisfied and use our aid as a lever on his government. Nolting now feels a personal commitment, on his own part, based on the US government's instructions, which causes him to oppose putting ourselves in a position of encouraging a coup to establish a government with which we could deal more effectively. He stated that he feels it is a bad principle and a bad precedent. He stated that he sees these courses - either make our pursuit of the coup project as clean-cut as possible and do everything we can to insure a preponderance of force; back off from the whole matter, which in his mind would be difficult now; or leave the whole matter for the generals to do if they have

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the courage to do it. Mr. Bundy stated that there is a considerable difference between where we are now and where we would be if we went all out to support the coup.

16. Mr. Hilsman agreed, stating that as of now the generals are running the show, and that if we backed off he doubted if the generals would stop. //

17. Mr. Ball proposed that the discussion get back to the fundamental question. He stated that he did not concur in Ambassador Nolting's good faith idea, in light of the Vietnamese conduct of the past few weeks. He stated that the US national interest is paramount and, with respect to Nolting's three courses, commented that to back-off completely improves nothing; that to let things develop as the generals choose to direct would insure that if they lose, we lose - which is intolerable. This leaves only the choice of marshalling our resources and taking the power out of the hands of incompetents. Governor Harriman endorsed Mr. Ball's statement. //

18. The President stated that we should determine what we might do here to make the effort succeed, then we should go back to Lodge and to Harkins with specific proposals regarding the help. We should express our doubts with respect to the balance of forces and the fragile nature of the arrangements to date. He noted that there had been contact between only two men and two generals. He stated that DOD should contemplate what we can do outside of Saigon to increase the chances of success and again raised the question of significance of the ratio of force orientation in the critical area. To this General Taylor replied that the actual numbers are not basic to the coup capabilities of forces, but that their resolution is the key.

19. Hilsman reminded the group that Ambassador Lodge has expressed ideas in the form of asking for authority to state that no aid would be delivered to the Diem government; that our advisors be prepared to suspend their assistance; that military resources be diverted to support of the coup group and that he

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be authorized to make a statement in support of the coup, if necessary.

20. Mr. McNamara stated that he believed we should make clear to Ambassador Lodge that he should not allow a coup to start if he is fearful that it would fail, because if it does, we lose South Vietnam. Beyond this we should express our worry over the force balance and then say that if he believes the effort should go forward we want to know what we can do to help. He commented at this time that we in Washington are almost powerless to run the operation.

21. The President then observed that no coup looks good at the beginning. This was seconded by Mr. Ball who stated the situation is different here than in 1960, because this time the best commanders are on the coup side, and so is the United States.

22. Governor Harriman stated that in his view we have lost South Vietnam if we do not have a successful coup. We cannot win with Nhu. It is inconceivable if we could ever rally the Vietnamese to fight again under the present government. He urged that we not raise again the question of proceeding, but that we give the people on the spot the fullest support. He stated that we created Diem and that he betrayed us. //

23. Hilsman then stated that it was earlier mentioned that Mr. Nhu might be aware of coup plotting. In this regard, it is his view that the generals are going to make it or die.

24. The President then directed that a message be sent to the Ambassador which expressed the general thought that we should not undertake this enterprise unless we believe it will succeed; that we should express our apprehensions against the balance of forces and raise questions as to what we can do to help. //

25. The Attorney General then stated that it is not clear in his mind what reaction we might expect from Diem; whether we have any information on what he is doing or what he might do in the way of counter-moves.


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26. Ambassador Nolting raised the question of what will be the condition of the country after a coup, to which Mr. Hilsman replied that the generals plan on having Tho assume power. The President asked about exile for Diem and Nhu, stating that nothing should be permitted to happen to them.

27. Ambassador Nolting made a final statement of his position, saying that nobody can hold that fragmented country together but Diem; that there is no great possibility of getting Diem to send Nhu away but that perhaps one more attempt would be in order. To this Mr. Bundy commented that Ambassador Lodge did not agree and Governor Harriman stated that he was definitely opposed to this action.


V. H. KRULAK
Major General, USMC



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