

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: October 29, 1963  
4:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Viet-Nam

PARTICIPANTS:	<u>The White House</u>	<u>Defense Department</u>
	The President	Secretary McNamara
	The Vice President	General Taylor
COPIES TO:	Mr. Bundy	Mr. William Bundy
	Mr. Forrestal	General Krulak
	<u>State Department</u>	<u>CIA</u>
	Secretary of State	Mr. McCone
	Governor Harriman	Mr. Helms
	Ambassador Johnson	Mr. Colby
	Mr. Hilsman (in final stages)	
	Mr. Mendenhall	
	The Attorney General	

Mr. Colby opened with an intelligence assessment of the lineup of forces pro-Diem and pro-coup. He indicated this assessment was not based on the information from General Don just received by cable, but rather on an overall CAS assessment of available information. He said that the pro and anti GVN forces in Saigon number about the same on each side: 9,800. There are also about 18,000 forces in the Saigon area which can be classified as neutral. Of the key elements, he listed the Presidential guard, the special forces, and the armor unit in the Saigon area as pro-GVN, except for one element of the Presidential guard. He listed airborne, air force and some parts of the Marine forces as anti-palace. In response to the President's question, he stated that the only change since August is that two Marine units have moved over to the palace side.

Mr. Colby said that there are two main categories of coup groups: (1) Can Lao dissidents; and (2) the Generals. There is some contact between these two main categories, but not very much.

In a discussion of the balance of forces, the President referred to the South Korean coup and indicated that there were relatively few pro-coup forces at first, but that the bulk of the forces were attracted to the coup as it progressed. He suggested, however, that the draft telegram to Lodge, which Mr. McGeorge Bundy had circulated at the

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beginning of the meeting, be expanded to ask for a detailed assessment of the balance of forces from Lodge, Harkins and CAS.

Secretary Rusk outlined various issues which require consideration. He said we should consider having Lodge pass the word to General Don on our concern over the possibility of prolonged fighting if the forces are relatively evenly balanced. He suggested Don be cautioned that if the Generals move they should have the situation sufficiently in hand that their move will cause little loss of life. He also suggested that Harkins be briefed on the situation by Lodge. He further raised the issue that both sides may ask for our help during a coup. He commented that if we help the coup group we shall commit ourselves by this action to guaranteeing its success because we shall have burned our bridges with Diem. If we help Diem, we shall fundamentally handicap the execution of the war because of the resulting adverse effect on the morale of the armed forces.

The President stated that if Ambassador Lodge delays his departure from Saigon this will be a tip off to our foreknowledge of a coup. He added that if Lodge leaves Harkins should be in charge if there is any coup activity. Secretary McNamara suggested that Trueheart be in charge until a coup starts and the responsibility then switch to Harkins. Prior to a coup, he suggested that a group of three -- Trueheart, Harkins and Smith -- serve to direct Conein and if there is any disagreement between them the divergencies be referred back to Washington. Mr. McCone suggested that Smith be kept out of the triumvirate and Secretary McNamara acceded to that point of view.

The Attorney General stated that this proposed coup makes no sense on the face of it from the U.S. standpoint. It would mean placing the whole future of Viet-Nam and Southeast Asia in the hands of an official whom we do not know well. We do know that Diem is a fighter who will go down fighting. Secretary McNamara reported on the basis of his visit that the war was going reasonably well and the coup raises a serious risk of a reversal of that trend. The Attorney General concluded that he believed we should play a major role in finding out what the coup plans are and in influencing whether or not a coup should take place. He pointed out that whatever we do or do not do the U.S. will be blamed anyway for the results.

Secretary Rusk agreed that the cable to go to Lodge should call for a more active role by the U.S. in assessing the proposed coup and in trying to influence whether it should come off, but Secretary Rusk added that if a major part of the Vietnamese military leadership feels that the war against the Viet Cong could not be won with the Diem Government then it is a major risk for the U.S. in continuing with this government.

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The Attorney General remarked that he was aware of no support for the view of certain Vietnamese military leaders that the war could not be won with the Diem Government. General Taylor expressed agreement with the Attorney General's point of view. He added that even if the coup is successful prosecution of the war will be hampered. For example, the new government would change all of the province chiefs. Mr. McCone also expressed agreement with the foregoing point of view.

The President said that he could not see why it would be necessary for the new government to change province chiefs. Secretary Rusk reiterated his concern about the possibility of prolonged fighting during a coup, but declared that if the coup succeeds he felt no concern about the ability of the new government to win the war. Governor Harriman expressed agreement that if the coup comes off successfully we need feel no concern about the progress of the war. He stated that the military situation is now gradually going downhill and military difficulties will increase since Diem does not exercise the leadership necessary for victory.

The President stated that the coup group should have the balance of forces in its favor. Mr. McGeorge Bundy interjected that as an alternative it might have tactical surprise in its favor. The President suggested again that Lodge's assessment be sought as to where the key military units stand with respect to a coup.

Ambassador Lodge's departure on his visit to the U.S. then became the topic of discussion. Secretary McNamara suggested that Lodge be left to judge whether he should delay his departure and that a military plane be made available to increase his flexibility in this regard. He indicated Lodge may wish to delay his departure because we have led him to believe in past messages that we support a coup and now we may appear to be drawing back. Secretary McNamara also commented that it seems hard for Lodge to talk to Harkins and that they are evidently not talking to each other at present.

It was agreed a military plane would be despatched for Lodge's use.

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