

HILSMAN, VIETNAM, ~~MCNAMARA~~

Memorandum of Conversation

~~TAYLOR~~ BOX NO. 4/6 HILSMAN, VIETNAM, WHITE HOUSE

DATE: August 26, 1963
12:00 Noon

MEETINGS BOX NO. 4/6

SUBJECT: Viet-Nam

PARTICIPANTS: White House:
The President
McGeorge Bundy
Mr. Forrestal

Defense Department:
The Secretary
Deputy Secretary Gilpatric
Gen. Maxwell Taylor
Major Gen. Victor Krulak

COPIES TO: State Department
The Secretary
Under Secretary George Ball
Under Secretary Averell Harriman
Assistant Secretary Roger Hillsman

CIA
General Carter, Deputy
Director
Richard Helms, Deputy
Director for Plans

The President wanted assurances that we were not being influenced by the New York Times; specifically the Halberstam article. He said that Halberstam was a 28-year old kid and he wanted assurances that we were not giving him serious consideration in our decision; that this reminded him of Matthews on Cuba.

Mr. Hillsman said that in all cases, Halberstam was inaccurate and incorrect and that our decision was not based on any information or opinion in the New York Times.

Governor Harriman pointed out that the decision was taken at the earliest possible moment that it could have been; that Saturday was the first day that we knew the situation and that no such decision could ever have been taken unless the people of Viet-Nam had themselves turned against the government; i. e., the act of beating up the Pagodas swung the people against the regime and that we had made our decision at the earliest possible moment after that act.

The Defense cable on Summary of Plans for Emergency and Evacuation was also discussed and the President directed the Defense Department to consider repositioning US forces in case they were required in Viet-Nam.

The President approved a circular telegram to discourage travel by American citizens to Saigon in view of the unsettled conditions there but decided against any

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public announcement at this time.

Robert Manning's request to make Saigon's 327 on Viet-Nameese censorship available to editors was also discussed. The decision was that we prepare an unclassified version of the cable as an advisory to editors but not for publication.

Mr. Hilsman then briefed the President [REDACTED] on the situation as of noon Monday, August 26, along the lines of the Talking Paper prepared by Conlin.

The President asked a number of questions about the personalities and the relationships between Khiem, Khanh, Minh, Nhu, General Don and so forth. The relative strength of the various forces in Saigon was also discussed--the impression being left that Colonel Tung's forces were the only military now present in Saigon with the exception of some Marine battalions which might in fact be loyal to Nhu.

General Taylor expressed some doubt as to whether we could get along without Diem. Mr. Hilsman reported that the biggest fear in the field and in Washington was that, if Nhu consolidated his power and the desecration of the Pagodas stood without retribution, that middle level officers and non-commissioned officers would simply lay down their arms and drift away. All felt that, though this course of action was dangerous, doing nothing was even more dangerous.

Mr. Hilsman said that Admiral Felt had called him Saturday, pointing out some lines in a telegram to this effect and expressing the hope that we would not tolerate Nhu's taking over. (Maxwell Taylor was visibly upset that Felt had called Hilsman and I am sure that Felt will hear about it.)

Secretary McNamara said that answers to four questions were urgently needed. The first question was what exactly is meant by "direct support to the military in an interim period if the central government is ineffective". Secretary Rusk explained that what was in our mind was the possibility of supplying military leaders in the field with arms, ammunition or to say with logistic support directly without going through the central government.

He then asked General Krulak if such arrangements could be made or whether logistic support was so heavily concentrated in Saigon that no alternative routes were feasible. General Krulak replied that logistics were heavily polarized through Saigon but that some alternatives could probably be worked out. General Krulak will have a study made on this urgently.

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Secretary McNamara said that he felt General Harkins should be queried on this point immediately.

Secretary McNamara's second question was, when Lodge and Diem would meet for a substantive talk and what would Lodge be saying. This, too, he felt should be the subject of a cable to the field urgently.

Secretary McNamara's third point was that the field should be queried as to what other Generals were associated with Khiem, Khanh, and Don and what their detailed plans were. Mr. Hilsman agreed to such a query and said that so far, the Generals for security reasons were reluctant to give us the names of their colleagues and their detailed plans but that we hoped to get these facts as the conversations with the Generals continued.

Secretary McNamara's fourth point was that the Generals and the field should be queried as to who their alternative would be to Diem. Mr. Hilsman described what we knew of the Generals' thinking about this subject at the moment--that it was conceivable that the Generals would choose to keep Diem without the Nhus, that they felt that Tho was a weak man but might retain him for at least an interim period, that a military junta might initially be formed behind Don since he was the acting Chief of Staff but that Minh would probably be the head man in such a junta. Mr. Hilsman said that we would continue to query the field on these subjects.

The President asked that we urgently prepare a Who's Who of the personalities there. He also directed that there be another meeting on the subject tomorrow and asked that Ambassador Nolting be present for that meeting.

The President then asked what our thinking was if the Coup should be unsuccessful. Mr. Hilsman said that the prospect was a very doomy one; that Nhu was anti-America and relationships would be extremely difficult with him; that if Nhu remained in power and the acts against the Buddhist Pagodas allowed to stand, then as mentioned before, middle level officers and non-commissioned officers would drift away and in our judgment disaster would be virtually unavoidable.

The Secretary said that if the Coup was unsuccessful we would be on an inevitable road to disaster. The decision for the United States would be, therefore, to get out and let the country go to the Communists or to move U.S. combat forces into South Viet-Nam and put in a government of our own choosing. There was no dissent from the Secretary's analysis.

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