

CONTROL AND COVER SHEET FOR TOP SECRET DOCUMENT

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28 September 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

VIA : Deputy Director (Plans)

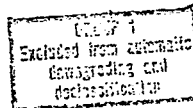
SUBJECT : Chronology of Events, Contacts and Discussions
Relating to the Saigon Station Coup d'Etat
Activities of August 1963.REFERENCE : (a) Memorandum for the Director, "Sequence
of Contacts with Vietnamese Generals,
August 1963".

(b) DIR 70474

1. The following is a chronological listing of the events, contacts and discussions relating to the Saigon Station coup d'etat activities between 21 August and 2 September 1963. This record has been prepared from a review of pertinent operational correspondence with correlative commentary from those officers directly involved and therefore, represents an accurate reconstruction of the events, contacts and discussions. All dates are Saigon time.

21 August Declaration of Martial Law

23 August Conein/General Tran Van Don, Acting Chief of Staff, Vietnamese Armed Forces meeting with following significant points: (a) troops not under General Don (General Ton That Dinh, Military Governor of Saigon, has control of III Corps troops and Colonel Le Quang Tung, Chief ARVN Special Forces High Command, is responsible only to the Presidency); (b) Don stated did not want President Diem replaced by an exile; admitted no one within the military was capable of replacing Diem; (c) stated this was the

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first step - could not reveal what next step would be; (d) stated that after first phase, things cannot revert back to what they were before - specifically referred to the government; (e) if Don had to choose between Diem and Counsellor Nhu, he would choose Diem; repeated that if had to make choice between the President and Nhu, Nhu was going; (g) wanted assurances of support from the USG.

25 August Spera/General Nguyen Khanh, Commanding General II Corps, held meeting morning 25 August at latter's request: (a) stated some of general officers determined to stop taking orders from Ngo family the very minute SVN anti-Communist stand comes into question; fears accommodation with the DRV; (b) asked if USG would support army takeover of the country - stated regardless of USG decision, they would go it alone should it become clear there was a softening on the anti-Communist position; (c) cited he has four divisions of troops; (d) does not trust General Don; (e) stated General Tran Thien Khiem, Chief of Staff, Joint General Staff, was completely on his side; (f) stated they were only generals and it would be up to USG to take care of political organization after the coup.

25 August During afternoon 25 August, Ambassador Lodge called Richardson to his (the Ambassador's) office; present were Lodge, General Harkins, DCM Trueheart, General Weede. DepTel 243 of 25 August had already been in part discussed before Richardson's arrival. Lodge and rest of the group accepted this cable as a command decision; the tenor of the meeting was simply that of proceeding with instructions; Lodge did not ask for comments or general discussion relating to the advisability or inadvisability of the action contemplated; Lodge's approach appeared to be that we should do everything possible to implement these instructions immediately and with maximum speed; the only discussion at this time related, as reported in SAIG 0296, to the question of whether Diem should be given an option of removing Nhu; General Harkins was strongly in favor

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of giving Diem an option; Lodge, Trueheart and Richardson believed that Diem would not accept such an option and that providing him with the option would further alert him to the possibilities of a coup effort against him; consequently, Lodge originated a message to State recommending against providing Diem with the option of removing Nhu; Trueheart took the lead in the formulation of this recommendation during the discussion; in view of the fact that this message was going forward and because the Ambassador was to present his credentials to President Diem on the morning of 26 August, no other action vis-a-vis Vietnamese personalities was contemplated prior to receipt of Washington's response and the completion of Lodge's presentation of credentials; Lodge and Harkins proposed that the Station convey guidances contained in DepTel 243 to Generals Khanh, Khiem, Don and perhaps Dinh. As stated in this communication, Harkins said that, if necessary, he would be willing to convey these guidances directly to the Vietnamese Generals.

26 August VOA broadcast stating ARVN not responsible for pagoda raids but blaming it on ARVN Special Forces and secret police headed by Counsellor Nhu; Ambassador Lodge presented credentials to President Diem.

26 August After Ambassador's presentation of credentials on the morning of 26 August, Lodge called a meeting at his residence attended by Lodge, Harkins, Trueheart, and Richardson. Mecklin (USIS Director) was inadvertently present and Ambassador allowed him to remain. Lodge decided that Harkins was to take no initiative with Vietnamese generals and that the American official hands should not show; in terms of American official hands, he asked Richardson also not to participate in discussions with Vietnamese on coup questions; during this meeting of 26 August, Richardson asked Lodge whether he (Lodge) interpreted DepTel 243 as an instruction to act and Lodge stated he did; again there was no discussion on the overall advisability or inadvisability of proceeding with the action; as stated SAIG 0300, the decision was

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taken during this meeting at Lodge's home that CAS would make contact immediately with Generals Khanh and Khiem. It cannot be recalled whether much, if any, discussion was devoted to whether we should fan out and make contact with a variety of Vietnamese military personalities; we were not sure of Don and Dinh, and Richardson's calculation was that we would be able to get the word to the generals as securely and effectively through Khanh and Khiem, the latter being in a reasonably strong and central position and according to Khanh, enjoying Khanh's full confidence; (as it turned out, during the process of these few days, the guidances reached, to our knowledge, Generals Duong Van Minh, Tran Van Minh, and Le Van Kim - the latter through the intermediary of Mr. Rufus Phillips who provided Kim with Ambassador Lodge's personal assurances of support and of backing for the CAS demarche.

- 26 August Conein/General Khiem meeting: (a) Nine points explained to Khiem (see reference (a) for listing of nine points). (These nine points had been cleared in written form by Trueheart who participated in drafting prior to their submission to either Khanh or Khiem); (b) Khiem asked that the nine points not be raised with General Don; (c) Conein to be taken to General Minh; (d) Khiem concurred in Spera contact with Khanh.
- 26 August Spera/General Khanh meeting in Pleiku: (a) Khanh not ready to move now; (b) wait until Counsellor Nhu moves in the direction of accommodation with the DRV; (c) disturbed because contact had been made with General Khiem without prior approval from him (Khanh); (d) Khiem asked that contact not be made with General Dinh; (e) asked if USG would give asylum and support to families of the coup principals.
- 27 August National Assembly elections postponed.
- 27 August Conein/General Khiem meeting: (a) Khiem asked for the meeting; (b) Khiem stated that at a meeting of the Generals at the JGS, it was agreed that a coup

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d'etat was to take place within one week; (c) the coup group was to be headed by General Duong Van Minh (see SAIG 0346 for additional names); (d) Generals Dinh and Cao to be neutralized; (e) Colonel Tung is the primary target; (f) Vice President Tho is aware of the plan and supports it; (g) the new government would not be a military junta but a mixture of civilian and military; (h) General Minh does not want direct contact; (i) General Khiem does not want direct contact except through Major Nhon with Spera; (j) there should be no more discussion of cutting off aid since it was confusing the various elements; (k) Khiem was assured of fact USG would attempt support the families in the event attempted coup was a failure.

28 August Spera/General Khiem meeting: (a) made arrangements for a meeting between Spera/Conein and Khiem/Minh; (b) Lt. Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao saw Khiem the previous day (27 August) stating he and Huynh Van Lang were planning a coup - asked for Khiem's participation; (c) Khiem stated Colonel Vien, Airborne Commander, was Counsellor Nhu's man; (d) cites forces available to the generals and states can also count on Marine Commander Lt. Colonel Nguyen Khang.

29 August At 0745 hours, Richardson, Spera and Conein, latter two of whom were scheduled to contact Generals Minh and Khiem at 0815 same morning, were shown a message from General Maxwell Taylor to General Paul Harkins stating aspects of Vietnam situation being reviewed at White House and commenting that second thoughts were beginning in Washington; faced with this information and given strictly limited time factors, Richardson decided that the meeting with Generals Minh and Khiem should not be postponed but that contacting officers would make this meeting a fact-finding mission without encouraging or discouraging General Minh.

29 August Conein/Spera meeting with Generals Minh and Khiem: 0815 hours: (a) Minh and Khiem reviewed reasons for caution; (b) Generals stated that the USG had built ARVN Special Forces into Can Lao Army;

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(c) Generals want firm evidence that USG will back them; (d) feeling is that the Generals have a plan but will not discuss it - mentioned that Dinh would have to be neutralized; (e) General Minh said that USG should stop economic aid to force Nhu's hand - this would give the Generals a moral reason for revolt since could then claim that without aid VC would win; (f) Minh paid lip-service to loyalty to President Diem; (g) stated Vice President Tho had lost much prestige lately; (h) military government was inevitable for initial period.

29 August

Rufus Phillips meeting with Bui Diem (Dai Viet politician and oppositionist) and General Le Van Kim: (a) informed Phillips of the Spera/Conein/Minh/Khiem meeting (see above) - Kim confused Spera for Richardson - asked if Spera/Conein meeting had blessing of Ambassador Lodge; (b) at subsequent meeting same night, Phillips confirmed that Ambassador had given full blessing; (c) Kim stated Conein should contact Khiem on morning of 30 August; (d) Minh needs American assistance on the actual specifics of a plan - how it should be carried out and what support the USG would render; (e) Ambassador authorized the contact with Khiem and stated we can volunteer assist in tactical planning. (b)(1)

(b)(3)

30 August

report received to effect that GVN would arrest the generals within 24 hours; warning was to have been passed through Major Nhieu by Colonel Newman. Nhieu could not be reached; Newman called Kim residence but feels phone tapped and person imitating Kim answered; Newman finally talked with Madame Kim; Kim's aide was sent to escort Newman and Colonel Strickler to Kim's residence.

30 August

Ingram/Lt. Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao meeting: (a) Thao, who claims be associated with Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen and Huynh Van Lang, met with generals evening of 29 August; (b) Thao claimed generals Khiem, Minh and Khanh would support coup if someone else starts; (c) military would support Vice President Tho; (d) Generals have too much to lose to start coup - prestige, position, fine living, etc.; (e) Thao

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indicated his opposition to Nhu; (f) claims will execute coup within one month; (g) listed proposed members new government (see SAIG 0483).

30 August

Station sought meeting with General Khiem who passed word through Major Nhon that he was too busy; Khiem was called to the Palace; Lodge decided that General Harkins would seek meeting with Khiem. Station suspended contacts until results of the Harkins/Khiem meeting were known; ordnance list of Colonel Tung's Long Thanh Camp was turned over as bonafides of USG intentions.

31 August

General Harkins meeting with General Khiem: General Harkins was authorized to meet with General Khiem to give Khiem assurances of USG backing; Khiem showed a reluctance to talk and suggested that Harkins meet with General Minh; Khiem commented that Minh had called off the planning and was working on other methods which Khiem would not describe; Khiem further states the Generals were not ready as they did not have enough forces under their control; Harkins decides not to give General Khiem assurances which he had been authorized to impart; Ambassador Lodge approved Harkins' decision on 31 August after Harkins reported; subsequently, approval of Harkins' decision was also received from the State Department.

31 August

Rufus Phillips meeting with General Kim: (a) Kim stated Nhu clearly knows of coup plotting but that planning was to continue but tightly compartmented; (b) Kim did not know that Khiem had seen Harkins on the morning of 31 August and was sure that Minh did not either; (c) Phillips informed Kim that Khiem had told Harkins that the Generals could do nothing and planning had ceased - perhaps best solution was for Nhu to become Prime Minister with military support; (d) Kim reacted violently, stated Khiem did not speak for rest of generals - Nhu unacceptable;

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(e) Khiem possibly turned against coup group and playing lone hand; (f) Kim suggests a meeting between Ambassador Lodge and General Minh.

Second meeting between Rufus Phillips and General Kim after Phillips had sought to see Ambassador Lodge; Phillips saw Lt. Colonel Dunn, Assistant to the Ambassador, who made the decision without reference to the Ambassador that meeting between Ambassador Lodge and General Minh would be undesirable. Significant points of Phillips/General Kim meeting: (a) Khiem had not informed Minh of his previous meeting with Harkins; (b) Nhu was aware of the plot; (c) a Colonel Cuong was reportedly contacted by unspecified Americans. Kim transmitted following from General Minh: (a) ARVN Special Forces were on full alert - coup attempt would result in certain failure; (b) planning had not been discontinued; (c) Nhu not acceptable under any conditions; (d) Generals did not lack the will - they lacked the means; (e) since no overt action had been taken by the USG against Nhu, people were not aware the USG was not still supporting Nhu; (f) Kim questions Khiem's reliability.

2 September Times of Vietnam headlines story entitled "CIA Financing Planned Coup d'Etat".

2. Correlative Commentary: Although various preliminary meetings had been held as outlined in the chronology above prior to 26 August, the Station began its action plan upon receipt of instructions from Ambassador Lodge after his credentials presentation on the morning of 26 August. Both General Khiem and General Khanh were contacted that day and the "nine points" were explained which, in our judgment, constituted a clear call for action. Both Spera and Conein state that during their meeting with General Minh on 29 August, General Minh confirmed that he was aware of the "nine points". Our assumption is that General Khiem acquainted Minh with these points and the approaches made by Conein. Spera was informed by General Khanh on 26 August that Khanh was proceeding immediately to Saigon to discuss the situation with Minh and Khiem - in the latter's case, Khanh had indicated that he regretted that Khiem had been cut in prior to

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receiving his (Khanh's) consent. To our direct knowledge, then, the three principal generals were promptly informed of the guidance contained in DepTel 243 and of the need for action. Both Conein and Spera were advised by Khiem and Khanh, respectively, not to see General Don. They considered General Dinh unreliable and a target to be neutralized.

3. Throughout, Lodge and Trueheart followed these developments closely and in detail. We reported to Trueheart on an item-by-item basis and also reported on a number of occasions directly to the Ambassador. The Ambassador's emphasis throughout was on the earliest possible action by the generals. Trueheart, together with Smith, Conein and Richardson, explored the developments and possibilities exhaustively on a day-to-day basis and on a 24-hour basis. Trueheart's emphasis was consistently on the need to get a coup started. Richardson encouraged launching a coup as soon as possible consistent with the probability of success. This position was in response to Agency communications and in response to President Kennedy's correspondence to Ambassador Lodge.

4. The passage of the "nine points" constituted a call to action. Conein told General Khiem we were 100% behind the effort whereas Spera did not discuss timing with General Khanh. Ambassador Lodge passed his personal assurances through Phillips to General Kim. Assurances were given of the USG's agreement to assist the families of the coup principals in the event of failure. On 26 August, General Khiem had given assurance of action within one week. The Station elected to approach this action with the General officers rather than with the officers below General officer rank since we felt we were in contact with the most powerfully placed senior officers where the best chance lay as well as protection of the USG and Vietnamese security, thereby avoiding starting various movements which would not be coordinated at a central point and thus counter-productive. There was a clear distinction between our full encouragement and actually being in a position to put together the ingredients for a successful coup. The actual composition and the launching of this action clearly lay with the generals and the Station was not in a position to engineer the actual coup. The Ambassador, who after all had not been in Saigon even a week, was not able understandably to provide specific guidance in terms of tactics or weighing the possibilities involved. Trueheart entered

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deeply into the operational picture and came up with a considerable number of suggestions as the effort developed. A significant factor was that at no time did we have sufficient details allowing for a definitive and reasonable assessment of the feasibility of success or failure of a coup action permitting a review of the data by General Harkins or Washington.

x 5. The developments of 29 August relate to the Maxwell Taylor cable to General Harkins as reported in SAIG 0520. When Spera and Conein returned from their meeting with Khiem and Minh, we proceeded to Trueheart's office to make our report. The Ambassador came in and Richardson advised him of our meeting with General Weede, of Taylor's cable, and of the decisions which Richardson had made as a result of the Taylor cable. Lodge was angry and expressed the view that Richardson's decision had destroyed the possibilities of carrying out a coup. Richardson expressed a firm dissenting opinion. Conein stated during this meeting that he thought the decision had adversely affected the meeting with General Minh. Spera stated he felt the Generals were not ready regardless of what we could have said. Richardson's review of the record leads him to conclude now, as he did on 29 August, that the Taylor cable incident had no actual effect on the development of coup possibilities.

x 6. When Richardson saw Trueheart that afternoon and told him that he felt it obligatory to report this development to his headquarters, Trueheart said he felt the Ambassador had already forgotten the matter; he went on to express the reservations incorporated in SAIG 0520, Paragraph 1. Since that time, there has been no further discussion of this matter between Lodge and Richardson or between Trueheart and Richardson. On Sunday afternoon, 21 September, Richardson informed Trueheart that he had sent in a cable for internal Agency records a few days before. Trueheart made no comment other than to express his understanding of Richardson's position that the professional record had to be kept. Richardson expects no repercussions from Trueheart's knowledge that Richardson had reported this development. Trueheart clearly understands that the report was made reasonably well after this particular coup operation had apparently come to an end.

7. As reported in SAIG 0485, Lodge held a meeting on 30 August with Harkins, Trueheart and Conein and he instructed

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Harkins to continue coup discussions with General Khiem as contained in the Station's cable. Before these instructions were issued, Richardson had advised the participants that he did not believe the generals had a specific plan or felt themselves ready to act. Richardson did this because Lodge had previously stated during the course of these developments that once General Harkins was thrown into a posture of active coup plotting directly with Vietnamese generals, the USG might well have reached a point of no return in its relations with Vietnam. Consequently, Richardson wished to enter his assessment and reservation on the record during this meeting even though this assessment was no more than impressionistic.

8. With these same considerations in mind, Richardson insured that General Harkins receive the report on the Ingram/Lt. Colonel Thao meeting on the evening of 31 August. At the time, Richardson knew that General Harkins was scheduled to meet with General Khiem the following morning and wished him to be alerted to the substance of Colonel Thao's report, which Richardson was inclined to accept as accurate. However, Richardson did not send Harkins a personal evaluation of this report.

9. On 31 August, we reported in SAIG 0499 the results of General Harkins' meeting with General Khiem. Harkins had reported this meeting personally to Lodge, Trueheart and Richardson that morning. Harkins' conclusion, from which none of the participants dissented, was that the generals' coup, as far as this phase was concerned, had come to an end. We received no instructions to continue efforts with the generals toward the objective of achieving a coup. Subsequently, the Ambassador's instructions were, and continue to be, that when the subject of launching a coup is brought up in conversation with us, we are neither to encourage nor discourage coup plotters but listen to their comments with an open-minded or sympathetic interest. Approximately one week ago, Trueheart informed Richardson that Washington wanted to be assured that we did not find ourselves inadvertently involved in sparking or cranking up a coup. In this connection, it should be pointed out that we have not informed the generals of any change in USG posture as represented by the "nine points". In other words, the USG call for coup action remains operative in the generals' minds. Richardson made this point to Trueheart and Colby separately on 28 September.

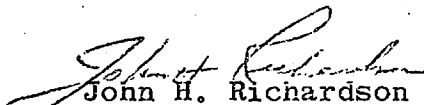
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10. As late as two or three days ago, Ambassador Lodge, in response to Richardson's question, confirmed again his previous guidance that we are neither to discourage nor encourage coup plotting but to receive information with open minded or sympathetic interest.

11. In preparation for Colby's visit to Saigon with Secretary of Defense McNamara, Richardson raised the possibility with Lodge and Trueheart of Colby's visiting Generals Khanh, Khiem, and perhaps General Duong Van Minh. These visits would be made within the framework of Colby's membership in a high-ranking official USG visitors team. Richardson thought that McNamara's group might constitute a natural context for Colby to see one or the other of these officers. It seemed possible that, if any of these officers wished to open up a subject privately with Colby, they might have the opportunity to do so. Lodge and Trueheart expressed strong reservations about Colby's visiting the generals in question.


John H. Richardson
Chief of Station, Saigon

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