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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DCI

SUBJECT: The Coup in Portugal

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The Coup in Portugal*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
PRECIS	i
PORTUGAL IN AFRICA	1
Rationale	1
Advantages	1
Costs	2
Pressures to Get Out	3
The Crisis	4
CHANGING ATTITUDES	5
Military Divided	5
The Oligarchy	6
The Church	8
Other Groups in Society	9
Caetano's Past Role	10
THE NEW QUESTIONS	12

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26 April 1974

SUBJECT: The Coup in Portugal

PRECIS

A. The virtually bloodless coup that toppled the government of President Thomaz and Prime Minister Caetano yesterday was triggered by Lisbon's African policies and the divisions within the military to which they gave rise. Superbly organized and well-led, the insurrectionists took the government by surprise. Loyalist forces offered only token resistance, and after fleeing to the headquarters of the national guard, Thomaz, Caetano, and several other ministers agreed after a few hours of negotiation to go into exile in the Madeira Islands. Thus far the new government appears to be in complete control.

B. The leaders of the rebellion, who called themselves the "armed forces movement," are virtually unknown, but they were almost certainly middle-level officers devoted to General Antonio de Spinola. After broadcasting an initial proclamation that called for both a liberalization of Portugal's colonial policies and a restoration of domestic liberties, the rebel junta promptly called on General Spinola to head their movement. Spinola accepted the call, reportedly received an enthusiastic public welcome in Lisbon, and according to the Portuguese radio, he has been proclaimed "head of Portugal."

C. In a speech to the nation last night Spinola promised to restore power to constitutional institutions once a president of the republic has been elected. Spinola could be expected to run for the post.

D. Spinola's accession to power is a remarkable demonstration of the power of both pen and sword. Portugal's most decorated war hero, he is also the author of a book that dared to say that a military solution to the problem of insurgency in the African territories is impossible and that a political solution must be found. Although perhaps not wholly out of line with Caetano's own thinking,

the book created a sensation when it appeared last February. It led to a small but abortive "march on Lisbon" in March, and left the country gripped in coup fever ever since. Despite Lisbon's nervous moves earlier this month to arrest various oppositionists, the government apparently was unaware of the magnitude of the coup threat it faced.

E. As "head of government," Spinola appears to be off to an auspicious start. His prestige is such that, despite the divisions within the armed forces, he may be able to keep them fully under control. The country, despite the influence of the ruling oligarchs and the radicalism of some of the opposition elements, may be ready for some modest movement toward change at home and abroad. Spinola can probably expect better relations with the rest of Europe, his NATO allies, and international critics of Portugal's overseas policies. He may be a less-demanding negotiator in the Azores base renewal talks.

F. However, it is also very possible that Spinola's victory may be the beginning of his troubles. Having ridden into power on the African issue, it is very doubtful that he has any real solution to it. The kind of commonwealth he has in mind is not ultimately acceptable to the African insurgents, and it is far from certain that he can carry Portugal with him in the long process of achieving an honorable escape for the army from the African swamp.

G. The paragraphs that follow provide additional background on the events that led to Spinola's apparent triumph and what may lie in store for him.

PORTUGAL IN AFRICA

Rationale

1. For more than a decade Portugal has been fighting insurgencies in Angola, Portuguese Guinea, and Mozambique. Lisbon bases its commitment on its presence for some 500 years in the African territories and its treatment of them as integral parts of Portugal in the Portuguese constitution. Lisbon believes that it has built a multi-racial society which is quite different from that of the former colonial powers and from the white minority governments of the Republic of South Africa and Rhodesia. The Portuguese stress that the overseas territories are a national heritage which they cannot honorably relinquish. The Portuguese also believe that they need the overseas provinces and their potential wealth and strategic location to maintain Portugal's international status and its economy.

Advantages

2. Except for Portuguese Guinea, the African provinces do in fact offer significant immediate and long-term economic returns to certain economic groups in Portugal. Large corporations in the metropole, owned by a few powerful families, control virtually all aspects of the territories' modern economic sectors,

including local industry, commerce, banking, and plantation agriculture. The metropole receives preferential trade treatment, and it controls the territories' sizeable foreign exchange receipts.

Costs

3. Thus far, however, the overall returns have not been sufficient to offset the expense of economic development and of fighting the insurgents. Only Angola comes close to paying its own way and may now be contributing as much as 60 percent to its development and war costs.

4. Military operations have been costly in manpower and in money. When the rebellion began in 1961, Portugal's armed forces numbered 84,000 men of which less than 30 thousand were stationed in Africa. As the insurgencies spread, the total figure rose accordingly and leveled off at around 216,000 in 1973 with more than 150,000 serving in Africa. Although some 60 percent of these forces are from the territories -- many of them black -- military service has caused a manpower shortage, aggravated by the emigration of young workers from the metropole to Western Europe. But the situation has been bearable because the number of soldiers killed in action has been relatively low in recent years, amounting to about 400 in 1973.

5. The military effort has also been a heavy financial burden. In 1960 Portuguese defense spending totaled only \$105 million. By 1973, the figure had increased almost five-fold, amounting to more than \$521 million. As a percentage of the Portuguese national budget, these defense expenditures represented 27 percent in 1960, 45 percent in 1966-1968, and 30 percent in 1973. As a percentage of GNP, defense costs have increased from 4.2 percent in 1960 to a high of 7.4 percent in 1968, leveling off at around 6 percent since 1970. This is almost twice the figure for the principal NATO countries.

Pressures to Get Out

6. These costs have been high enough to raise serious doubts about Lisbon's long-term chances of retaining the provinces. An upsurge of attacks by black insurgents in Mozambique last January and February caused concern in Lisbon that the internal security problem there might be getting out of hand. But the real concern is over the stalemate in Portuguese Guinea. There the Portuguese control the towns and principal roads, but the guerrillas control much of the hinterland with neither side able to oust the other. The situation is discouraging enough to have led some military leaders, such as General Spínola, to declare that a military victory is impossible and to urge a political

solution, such as a plan for federation. But such alternatives appeal neither to the far right, nor to the insurgents who of course want immediate freedom.

The Crisis

7. The crisis that led to the coup dates from February 22 when General Spinola, then vice chief of staff of the armed forces and former governor and commander in chief in Portuguese Guinea, published his book Portugal and the Future. Spinola called for a new Portuguese constitution to provide civil liberties and democratic institutions in all areas administered by Portugal and to create a federation of sovereign states between Portugal and its overseas possessions. Plebiscites to determine if the Africans want to remain with Portugal would be allowed. Spinola acknowledged that this policy would risk the eventual severance of all ties between Portugal and its overseas territories, but he accepted this risk in the belief that continuation of past policies would virtually guarantee such an outcome anyway.

8. Rightists were outraged by the public airing of such views and demanded Spinola's removal along with that of his chief, General Costa Gomes, who supported Spinola. Prime Minister Caetano, who initially resisted this pressure, gave in and

removed Spinola and his chief. The very conservative General Luz Cunha, was appointed to Costa Gomes' post and some officers sympathetic to Spinola were reassigned. In response, some petitions were circulated in favor of Spinola, and on 16 March a 200-man army unit near Lisbon, led by young officers sympathetic to Spinola and Costa Gomes, attempted to march on the capital. However, they were intercepted and arrested by troops loyal to the government.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

Military Divided

9. The military was deeply divided by these events. Most of the senior officers, led by the new chief of staff of the armed forces, General Luz Cunha, are opposed to General Spinola's ideas which, in their opinion, would lead to the loss of the African provinces. These officers participated in a public oath of loyalty to the government, and the refusal of Costa Gomes and Spinola to participate -- on the grounds that the military were not supposed to be involved in politics -- was the ostensible reason for their being sacked.

10. On the other hand, some high ranking officers supported General Spinola, especially his thesis that a military victory is impossible. They do not want the army to become a scapegoat

for giving up in Africa and saw Spinoia's proposals as an honorable way out. Until the coup, however, it did not appear that these moderates were interested in an attempt to overthrow the government on African policy. Indeed it was not clear that Spinoia and Costa Gomes wanted to do that either. Neither had any known contact with the military regiment that marched on Lisbon, and Spinoia said that he was awaiting another military assignment.

11. A number of junior and middle grade officers also supported Spinoia's ideas. Some of these were angered enough over his firing and the arrests and reassignments of his supporters to circulate protest petitions, and some participated in the small scale march on Lisbon. There were also reports in March and April of dissent among the military in the African provinces, that apparently aroused the concern of the Directorate General of Security.

The Oligarchy

12. In the context of the authoritarian system that has prevailed so long, these stirrings of dissent were, of course, unusual. Since Salazar's time a group of perhaps 40 families who control most of the country's wealth have played a decisive role in the exercise of political power. Their position is

derived from their control of the economy, ownership of news media, representation in the legislative bodies, and their close connection with top government officials. Consequently, government policy has reflected the conservative political, economic, and social views of this group. Their business interests in Portuguese Africa are immensely profitable, and hence they have long opposed any loosening of Portugal's overseas ties even though this has meant the continuation of a large and expensive military force to combat the African insurgents.

13. The Portuguese oligarchs are nevertheless astute businessmen, and probably would in time adjust to a new Portuguese relationship with the African provinces. Many of them favor more rapid economic growth and closer association with Europe, and most have already diversified their investments so that their wealth is not dependent on their African holdings.

14. Portugal's economic ties with Western Europe, which in recent years have developed more rapidly than its economic links with the African territories, provide an alternative to the African ties. This factor would make it easier than before for Portuguese commercial interests to consider alternatives in Africa if the cost of fighting the dissidents became too great. Thus

if the oligarchy came to feel that Portugal's cause in Africa were lost, its members probably would opt to get out and cut their losses, thereby protecting their larger interests in the metropole and worldwide. There have in fact been reports that some of the influential families were impressed by Spínola's thesis that the present overseas policy is unrealistic.

The Church

15. The church has been circumspect about criticizing the Caetano government, but in recent years individual priests -- speaking against the lack of civil rights -- have strained relations between church and state. A peace vigil held in a Lisbon church on New Year's Day last year in which a priest read a strong statement condemning Portugal's wars in Africa led to the arrest of several priests and militant Catholics. The episode increased public awareness of internal opposition to the African wars, and the arrest of the priests almost caused a church-state clash.

16. Last July the Portuguese bishops issued a pastoral letter which called for greater personal freedom and increased political participation by the laity. Although they avoided the question of the war in Africa, the Conference of Bishops in the Metropole in October expressed solidarity with the bishops of

Mozambique -- an action indirectly critical of the government's restriction of civil rights there. Last month a petition circulated in Nampula diocese in Mozambique that was critical of the church hierarchy for collaborating with Lisbon in maintaining a repressive system in Mozambique. The government responded by ousting the bishop and six of the priests who signed the petition. Prospects, therefore, are that should yesterday's insurrection lead to a more liberal-minded government, it would find a substantial number of allies in the church.

Other Groups in Society

17. Labor, intellectuals, students, and illegal opposition groups have had little or no voice in Portuguese policy for years. Some small terrorists groups have set off occasional protest bombs, but these have been of no consequence to the government. Nevertheless, the unrest in the military that surfaced after the firing of Spínola and Costa Gomes last month apparently worried the government that dissident groups would use the resulting situation to demonstrate. Premier Caetano warned in a speech that any such demonstrations would only lead to a crackdown, and in early April the police arrested some 50 oppositionists, most of whom were attending a meeting to form a consumer cooperative.

Caetano's Past Role

18. Although sparked by the Spínola book, the underlying causes of crisis were therefore building for some time. During the past four or five years Caetano had explored -- or at least tried to open a dialogue on -- the possibility of a loosening of Portugal's tight grip on its African territories. During the 1969 legislative elections, Caetano proposed a debate on the overseas policy. When the opposition candidates responded, however, the military took alarm and forced a ban on the subject. Caetano's constitutional amendments approved in 1971 -- which provided for local autonomy in domestic affairs -- were permitted only after he gave assurances to the ultras that he had no intention of weakening Lisbon's control.

19. Caetano's strength heretofore had been his ability to balance pressures from ultra rightists and moderates, and to know when to draw back. As the rebellion dragged on with no end in sight, Caetano continued to make cautious moves to reopen the subject of more local autonomy for the Africans. These moves reportedly caused a right wing group to make an effort last December to pressure President Thomaz to replace the Prime Minister with an ultra conservative. But their plan was thwarted when some high military officers who supported Caetano, brought

counter pressure to save him. When Spinoła's book was published -- evidently with Caetano's approval -- this was too much for the ultras, however. Caetano was unable to resist their demands that the general be fired, and in doing so the Prime Minister made his survival more dependent on the ultra right than before. This upset the political balance Caetano had tried to maintain, and since mid-March Caetano had seemed at pains to try to redress it.

20. In his speech to the nation on March 28 after the abortive military revolt, Caetano reassured the rightists by pledging that Portugal would never abandon the African provinces. But he also sought to reassure the moderates by dealing gently with the rebels who marched in Lisbon, and by refraining from criticizing Spinoła and his federal solution. The Spinoła book continued to be sold in Lisbon.

The New Questions

21. Whatever Caetano's intentions, his failure to achieve them has in any event left a great many unanswered questions. Foremost among them is of course the further evolution of the political situation in Portugal itself. The coup has thus far come remarkably close to being a peaceful change of government. The rebel forces appear to have been exceedingly well-organized and competently led, while the forces loyal to

the government have chosen -- so far at least -- not to resist. General Spinoia, having accepted the call to leadership, commands a respect that might be sufficient to keep the situation within the armed forces fully under control. In due course they could possibly begin to put into effect the domestic and overseas policy reforms that they and the insurrectionists espouse.

22. Working against this scenario of essentially peaceful change, however, will be a number of hazards. The divisions that had developed within the armed forces are real and deep, and the new regime will thus have to move with some caution. Although the Portuguese oligarchy has been looking more toward the future, they remain for the most part rigidly conservative in their views of society. Some of the opposition elements that have been operating more or less sub rosa in Portugal will be willing to operate within a liberalized governmental machinery, but some of the more radical ones may not. With President Thomaz apparently exiled by force, some question of the government's legitimacy will linger.

23. By far the greater hazard to the new government, however, will be what now happens in the overseas territories. The basic insurgency problem remains, the wait-and-see attitude that civilian and military elements in the territories

have taken may be short-lived, and the insurgents may take heart from Lisbon's disarray. General Spinoia's ideas of increased autonomy within a Lusitanian commonwealth does not meet the insurgents' requirements, and any movement in that direction will perforce require time and the continued Portuguese military presence. The colonial forces might be willing to accept a fairly prolonged period of transition if such a policy seems to have some chance of extricating the army with its self-image intact. But if the policy falters, Spinoia will be in trouble. Meanwhile, Rhodesia and South Africa -- never sure of Portugal's staying power -- will likely feel they have no choice but to increase their military establishment.

24. So far as Portugal's external relations are otherwise concerned, there is good reason to believe that a new and more reformist regime in Lisbon would in several ways be helpful. Portugal's African policies have made it a pariah among its European allies and a target of anti-colonialist criticism in the international community at large. Its prospects for closer relations with the European Communities would be considerably improved if its overseas policies seemed to be moving in a new direction -- and, looking much farther to the future, the colonies themselves might find a closer association with the EC an advantageous prospect. The Portuguese

events will of course be watched with intense interest in Spain, but Madrid is not likely to take any action against a fait accompli -- particularly one perpetrated by the essentially conservative elements of the establishment associated with Spinoia; only in the remote event that the ousted leaders tried a counter-coup or civil hostilities otherwise broke out might the Spanish consider the possibility of some kind of intervention. Finally, since the modern weapons that Portugal has been seeking from the US in the Azores base negotiations have been largely tied to the insurgency problem, it is quite probable that the new government will moderate its demands.