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25 October 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD:

SUBJECT: Meeting with the President, McNamara, Attorney General, Bundy, myself concerning South Viet Nam

1. The President stated the purpose of the meeting was to consider (1) recent actions in South Viet Nam with respect to coup planning and qualifications of the individuals reporting, and (2) our policy in South Viet Nam as he wished to be assured there was unanimity within the government prior to the return of Ambassador Lodge.

2. With respect to the first item I stated that I felt we were handling a very delicate situation in a non-professional manner and that the reports indicated it in such statements as paragraph 3 of SAIG 1956.

"Gen. Don stated that Gen. Harkins had reiterated the fact that he had misunderstood a presidential directive, that Ambassador Lodge was aware of and controlling Conein's contacts with Don, and that Conein was the proper person with whom to speak."

This placed us in a position that if General Don was being "managed" by Diem and Nhu there was absolutely no plausible denial of U. S. officials participating in coup plotting at the levels of the President, General Harkins and Ambassador Lodge.

Secretary McNamara supported this position and went much further, stating that Conein's wires were inaccurate, not checked or verified as evidenced by General Harkins' denials of statements attributed to him. Furthermore, the whole coup business was being handled in an amateurish way by inexperienced people from Lodge on down.

I stated that we were dissatisfied and pointed out that this morning's cable (Lodge to Bundy) stated that "CAS has been punctilious

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in carrying out my instructions. I have personally approved each meeting between General Don and Conein who has carried out my orders in each instance explicitly." On this basis CIA has no control over this situation and therefore could assume little responsibility.

After an extended exchange in which all expressed concern over the existing situation, the President asked that CIA come up with (a) a plan for installation of a chief of station and reorganization of the station, and (b) plan for further conduct of monitoring coup plotting in a way that would be non-attributable and therefore deniable. These plans should be available prior to Ambassador Lodge's return.

3. The President then said that he felt that I was not in agreement with policy and asked my views on the course of action we are pursuing. I stated as follows:

a. I was dissatisfied with the present actions of the Ambassador, General Harkins and the Station because if General Don was being "managed" by Nhu then we would be seriously embarrassed.

b. There is a possibility, however, that General Don has a coup in the making and will pull it off.

c. If so we in CIA felt we could expect an interregnum and a period of political confusion because CIA does not feel that the Generals involved in the coup plotting are capable of providing immediate, dynamic leadership to the country.

d. We forecast that this political confusion would then end up, quite possibly, in another coup at some undetermined future time and after that some form of political order would probably evolve.

However, I pointed out that the effect of all this on the war effort was difficult to determine, and indeed it was possible that the war might be lost during the interregnum and period of political confusion.

e. I said that in CIA's opinion there were civilians fully capable of running South Viet Nam, however, it is not clear to us how these men, some of whom are in South Viet Nam and others outside of the country in exile or on political assignments could be injected into the government and exercise effective control.

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f. I then said that in examining the Diem-Nhu actions in the last 60 days it is to be noted that they have taken constructive military moves as recommended by McNamara and Taylor; have taken a few relatively unimportant political steps; but have apparently "dug in" on the really important political issues. These however have not so much as been discussed with them because of the policy of "correct, cool attitude."

g. At this point I noted that the policy of "correct coolness" had foreclosed either overt or covert contact with Diem and Nhu and hence had shut off all intelligence concerning their thinking and plans. Although some contacts at the lower level [redacted] had continued, they were non-productive. Furthermore, we observed Diem and Nhu had instituted their own policy of "correct, cool attitude" and apparently had warned many of their subordinates, both civilian and military, to be extremely careful in their contacts with the American mission.

(b)(1)  
(b)(3)

4. I stated that we were at a crossroads. We either have to work with Diem and Nhu or we have to take aggressive steps to remove them and it was not clear that the succeeding government would be much better. However, it was clear that the resulting political confusion would be damaging.

I then said that I felt we should work with Diem and Nhu as the most desirable alternative. We should keep in contact with them and this differed from present policy. We should exercise persuasion, influence and pressure to get them to institute some political reforms. This, I felt, was in the best interest of winning the war.

I said that there was some hope that Lodge might get started on this course during this coming weekend when he would be with Diem. I didn't think he should sit stony faced waiting for Diem to talk to him but rather he should talk to Diem and get the issues out on the table and recommended he be so instructed.

5. The President ordered Bundy to cable Lodge expressing our concern over the situation described above and also urging free and open talks with Diem over the coming weekend.

6. The President also asked that (1) CIA develop a plan as outlined above promptly and (2) arrange for Dave Smith to return with Lodge.

JAM:mcm

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