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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

McNAM, WHITE HOUSE

McNAM, VIETNAM, ~~McNAMARA~~

MEETINGS BOX NO: 4/6

Memorandum of Conversation

~~VIETNAM TRIP~~ BOX NO. 4/6

NO

DATE: August 27, 1963
4:00 p. m.

SUBJECT: Viet-Nam

Distribution

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

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

COPIES TO: State Department
The Secretary
Under Secretary George Ball
Assistant Secretary Roger Hilsman
Ambassador Nolting

CIA
General Carter, Deputy Director
Richard Helms, Deputy Director
for Plans
Mr. William Colby

Justice: Attorney General Kennedy USIA: Mr. Edward Murrow

CIA began with a briefing which recapitulated events of the last few days-- the suppression of the students, the house arrest of Foreign Minister Mau, the increasing appearance of photographs of Nhu and a rundown of the response to our approach to the various generals.

Secretary McNamara gave a rundown of Harkins' telegram of the generals involved in the coup and the forces they controlled as opposed to the generals not involved or likely to be loyal to Diem and the forces they control.

The President then queried Ambassador Nolting at great length.

The President asked Ambassador Nolting what he thought of these generals. Nolting replied that they don't have the guts, determination and leadership capabilities of Diem and Nhu. Nolting was skeptical about the coup succeeding.

Nolting said that he had found Diem a man of integrity who kept his word. Asked if he had not had assurances that Diem would not use repressive measures against the Buddhists, Nolting read a long memcon in his own handwriting recounting the promises that Diem and Nhu had made to him on this subject. He said that he felt that Diem had changed his mind between the 15th and the 21st as a result of further demonstrations, burnings and refusals by the

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Buddhists to participate in joint investigations of alleged persecution.

Nolting felt that Vice President Tho was a good man, popular, down to earth, but not forceful or ambitious.

Nolting speculated on the possibility of persuading Diem to send Nhu as Ambassador to Washington and Madame Nhu as Representative to the UN. He immediately recalled, however, that three years ago Ambassador Durbrow had tried this under instructions and the result was not that the Nhuses left but that Durbrow did. The President said that if we give Cabot Lodge such instructions it will be the shortest round trip in history.

Asked for his recommendations, Nolting replied as follows: (1) The US should keep its eye on the main problem--fighting the Viet Cong--and should not give in to newspaper pressure. (2) The US cannot clean up the internal politics of Viet-Nam. They will continue with or without Diem and the Nhuses. If smouldering resentment against Diem and the Nhuses rises up and shows itself in the military and the countryside, then we have another problem. It seemed to Nolting that to jump--but then the US has already given word to the generals to get "cracking"--his instinct was not to jump, especially since there was no place to jump to. He felt that we should appraise the potential success of the coup and that if there were any doubts caution the military not to launch an unsuccessful coup.

The President asked if Mr. Nolting did not believe that events of the past few weeks have made it impossible for the Diem/Nhu government to succeed and for us to continue to support them. Ambassador Nolting replied that he thought we should take it slow and easy and see if we can live with the Diem government. The brutal surgery on the Buddhists may well work. The US, of course, would have to take its lumps, but Diem and Nhu may well have been right.

Asked again whether the coup had any prospect of success, Nolting said that it depends on the US attitude. Asked of the prospects of a coup against Nhu rather than Diem, Nolting replied that Diem and Nhu were Siamese twins.

Nolting suggested an approach to Diem requesting the political liquidation of Madame Nhu and a damper on brother Nhu.

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Asked if Nhu was planning a coup against his brother, Nolting said that he doubted it. However, it was perfectly possible that the family had decided that Diem should move to a more honorific position permitting the younger brother to take a more central role preparing for the succession. Diem might become a "constitutional" President, for example, with Nhu in some newly created "prime minister" type post.

A. The Secretary said that this was all very well but that he thought the world reaction in other countries, in domestic US opinion, in Thailand, in Cambodia and all other Asian countries to the desecration of the pagodas meant that this would mean a great deal more than "taking our lumps."

The Secretary added that he also felt that the reaction among the Vietnamese must not be underestimated. Quite apart from the international repercussions, the gut question was whether the turmoil would spread to the countryside and to the younger officers and noncommissioned officers. The Secretary doubted that the war could be prosecuted successfully by a Diem/Nhu government in the light of their recent actions.

The Secretary requested Hilsman to prepare a study of the wider spectrum of possibilities, each of the various contingencies facing us.

B. In light of what Nolting had said and the fact that the coup generals had not enlisted the Third and Fourth Corps commanders, the President wondered whether we should not take another look at the situation.

It was decided to send a cable to Lodge and Harkins asking for their judgment on the probable success of a coup and their estimate of whether the turmoil would spread to the countryside and the military.

It was agreed that a cable of inquiry should be sent to Lodge and Harkins, and both the President and Secretary McNamara made specific suggestions as to the questions to be answered.

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