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[R] - ITEM IS RESTRICTED



MEMORANDUM

TO : Fritz Schwarz  
Curt Smothers

FROM: Rhett Dawson

DATE: July 7, 1975

RE : Diem Assassination

I. OverviewA. Summary

The assassinations of South Vietnamese President Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, on November 2, 1963, concurrent with a Vietnamese generals' coup, represents the most remote, if even that, instance of CIA involvement in the murder of a foreign leader presently being considered by the Committee. Based on all available evidence, Diem's assassination appears to have been a spontaneous and solely Vietnamese-inspired act, guided by anger at Diem for not making available his resignation or presence to coup leaders. The only remaining incident casting doubt on this evidence is the failure of the American Embassy to provide safe conduct for Diem and Nhu out of the country, as originally planned by the generals. (See paragraph II.E.) Nhu's assassination was a part of the plan almost from its inception.

B. Conclusions

1. Diem's assassination represents not an incident of an abuse by CIA as much as it does an account of mistaken national policy.
2. The Kennedy Administration, under intense public pressure from both the New York Times and other dispatches from Saigon, sought to disassociate itself from the repressive Diem regime.
3. A rift between the staff members of State and the National Security Council, on the one hand, and DoD and CIA, on the other, as to whether Diem and Nhu must be driven from office exacerbated the situation and ill-served President Kennedy.
4. Although the generals relished the idea of killing Diem's brother, Nhu, it was considered that Diem himself would be allowed to live and either leave the country or, possibly, even retain the presidency. No evidence has been adduced that U.S. representatives were aware of the murder of Diem until after it was done.

C. Alternatives

It appears that the Committee should either:

1. Consider the Diem assassination not as an element of CIA involvement in the killing of foreign leaders, but as an instance of U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of a foreign country, not unlike Chile, which led to a coup and the leader's not totally unexpected murder by indigenous military; or
2. Examine McGeorge Bundy and others on the delay in obtaining air evacuation for Diem and Nhu to a country of asylum; or
3. Continue staff investigation further to develop existing evidence as to the killing; or
4. Draft a report based on evidence available at this time.

D. Recommendation

It is recommended that the Committee examine McGeorge Bundy and others, if necessary, on the delay in air evacuation to asylum.

II. History

A. The Bombing in Hue

1. Chronology

May 6, 1963

Diem revives regulation banning public display of any religious flag — either Buddhist or Catholic — probably due to excessive display of the Vatican flag in DaNang a few days earlier.<sup>1</sup>

May 7, 1963

Vui Van Long arrives in Hue and, seeing the city already bedecked with flags for the Buddha's birthday the next day, tells Buddhist monks that the regulation will not be enforced. Despite Long's reversal of the order, Thich Tri Quang, a Buddhist monk, decides to send

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monks around to tell people to take down flags as a result of Diem's order.<sup>2</sup>

May 8, 1963

Quang publicly criticizes Diem at Buddhist gathering for flag regulation and crowd gathers at a radio station, resulting in grenades being exploded. There is a conflict in the evidence as to who threw the grenades as (a) it was generally assumed that Diem's troops caused the 8 deaths, but (b) medical evidence found that none of the bodies had metal fragments, implying the grenades were plastic, usually associated with Viet Cong.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Significance

Conein stated that this event was the catalyst that brought down the Diem regime.<sup>4</sup> This event, along with the self-immolation by monks and Madame Nhu's (Diem's sister-in-law) incredibly bloodthirsty statements that she would like to furnish some mustard at a bonzes (monks) barbeque,<sup>5</sup> received unfavorable press and brought pressure on the Kennedy Administration to disassociate itself from that of Diem and apply "direct, relentless and tablehammering pressure on Diem such as the United States had seldom before attempted with a friendly sovereign government."<sup>6</sup>

## B. The Abortive August 1963 Coup

### 1. Chronology

July 4, 1963

The initial conscious decision and agreement among the coup principals (Generals Minh, Don, Kim, and Khiem) takes place, probably before this date; even though the August coup fails, the intention is never abandoned.<sup>7</sup>

July 1963

A majority of the coup plotters, including Minh, desire that Diem retire. As to Ngo Dinh Nhu, his wife Madame Nhu, and the warlord brother Ngo Dinh Can, there was never dissention -- their deaths are welcomed.<sup>8</sup>

August 21, 1963

Special Forces, under personal loyalty to Nhu, attack several pagodas in the Saigon area. Reasons for the raid are unclear, but they may be (a) timed when there is no U.S. Ambassador in South Vietnam (Nolting left a few days before and Lodge was on his way)<sup>9</sup> and to (b) an effort by the Nhu's to strike back at a pagoda which "was more a political command post than a holy place," serving as Quang's headquarters.<sup>10</sup>

August 24, 1963

Deptel 243, prepared by Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and Undersecretary of State Averell Harriman,<sup>11</sup> and cleared in Hyannisport by President Kennedy,<sup>12</sup> is dispatched to the newly arrived Ambassador Lodge. It demands that Diem rid himself of his brothers, Nhu and Can, and, if he does not do so, Lodge is told that the U.S. will no longer support Diem. Further, he is told to convey to military commanders the assurance that they will receive "direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government...."<sup>13</sup> The Country Team is directed to look at alternative Vietnamese leaders and make plans as "to how we might bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary."<sup>14</sup>

August 25, 1963

In a CIA cable, Chief of Station Richardson reports back the results of a conference among Lodge, Deputy Chief of Mission Trueheart, General Harkins (Commander, MACV), and himself. The group concludes that giving Diem option in Hilsman's cable has no chance of succeeding, and accepts Deptel 243 as decision from Washington.<sup>15</sup>

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August 26, 1963

Lodge presents credentials to Diem.<sup>16</sup> CIA agents Conein and Spera are told to tell the generals the substance of Deptel 243, but that "we cannot be of any help during initial action of assuming power of state."<sup>17</sup>

August 28, 1963

Maxwell Taylor; in a cable, elicits Harkins' views on feasibility of operation as Washington is having second thoughts. Taylor claims that Deptel 243 was prepared "without DoD or JCS participation."<sup>18</sup>

August 29, 1963

Conein and Spera meet with generals, who want firm evidence of U.S. support, and Minh flatly states that in order to do this, U.S. should stop economic aid to Diem (which was done in September).<sup>19</sup>

August 31, 1963

In a CIA cable from Saigon, Washington is told, "(t)his particular coup is finished....generals did not feel ready and did not have sufficient balance of forces....There is little doubt that GVN aware U.S. role and may have considerable detail...."<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Significance

This period bears examination because it, and principally Deptel 243, sets the tone for later relations between the Country Team and the generals. Minh, disbelieving at first that the U.S. is really supporting him, grows in confidence, despite the U.S. military's continuing support of Diem.<sup>21</sup> In the next period, Minh finds that of the 15 or so coups<sup>22</sup> being planned, Lodge, through Conein, endorses his.<sup>23</sup> Nhu promises to get out of Saigon, but by this time no one trusts another's word and Nhu stays.<sup>24</sup>

## C. The November Coup

### 1. Chronology

September 13, 1963

Lodge complains bitterly that having to meet with Diem "is an extremely time consuming procedure" and asks that he not have to do so unless he

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October 24, 1963 Conein meets with Don, a coup leader, and informs him that the U.S. does not "go for this knocking off."<sup>32</sup>

October 28, 1963 Conein meets with Don for last time before coup is launched and is told that he will receive four hours' notice. Don wants firm departure time from Vietnam for Lodge's temporary return to Washington.<sup>33</sup>

November 1, 1963 Saigon Embassy still does not have coup force plans.<sup>34</sup>

1315 hours Instead of getting four hours' notice, Embassy receives four minutes' warning of start of coup.<sup>35</sup> An aide to Don tells Conein to go to Joint General Staff (JGS) headquarters and bring with him all the money he can lay his hands on. Conein takes 3 million piastre Station had stored 5 million piastres (\$68,000).<sup>36</sup>

1340 hours The generals are unable to contact palace by phone, but propose Diem resign immediately, guaranteeing safe departure to him and Nhu. Otherwise, palace will be attacked at 1530 hours.<sup>37</sup>

1345 hours Palace surrounded.<sup>38</sup>

1650 hours Minh tells Nhu that if he and Diem do not resign within 5 minutes, the palace will be bombed.<sup>39</sup>

1715 hours Minh telephones Diem, but Diem hangs up on him. Minh orders the palace to be bombed.<sup>40</sup>

1845 hours Troops are moving in on the palace.<sup>41</sup>

1856 hours Diem refuses again to capitulate.<sup>42</sup>

1915 hours Minh gives Diem another chance to surrender; if he refuses, he will be blasted "off face of the earth."<sup>43</sup>

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2140 hours

One air assault on Presidential Guard barracks launched before nightfall. No others launched before nightfall as Minh waits to give Diem one more chance to resign.<sup>44</sup>

November 2, 1963

0650 hours

Diem calls Don with offer to surrender unconditionally.<sup>45</sup>

The generals proceed to palace to pick up Diem and Nhu and escort them to JGS. They will request preference as to destination and seek approval of the country designated.<sup>46</sup>

0800 hours

Escort at palace, but neither Diem nor Nhu appear.<sup>47</sup>

How Diem and Nhu leave the palace and are subsequently located is a question open to dispute. Conein speculates that they escaped through a third, unknown tunnel<sup>48</sup> and go to a Catholic Church in Cholon. Being familiar faces, an informant identifies them and calls JGS.<sup>49</sup> Another less speculative and more detailed account, by a CIA source, states that Diem and Nhu left the palace the previous evening with a Chinese businessman and went to the Church at 0800 hours, November 2, 1963. Ten minutes later, they were picked up by the Army and forced into an Army vehicle, in which they were locked.<sup>50</sup> Higgins reports this account to some extent, but states that Diem called Khiem, a coup leader, and offered to resign, disclosing their whereabouts in Cholon. Then, she states, Minh called a meeting, excluding Khiem, and a convoy was organized. Diem and Nhu are forced into a vehicle, left to themselves by Colonel Lam, who seeks their safe conduct. When Lam, at the end of the convoy, arrives at JGS, he finds Diem has been shot in the back of the head, and Nhu stabbed in the chest and shot numerous times in the back. Both had their hands tied behind their backs.<sup>51</sup> Minh tells Conein that Diem and Nhu committed suicide, but Conein doubts that a Catholic would take his life in a church.<sup>52</sup> Minh, according to Higgins, later states that his aide, Captain Nhung, had gotten into the vehicle with Diem and Nhu and, having been provoked into an argument, shoots them both.<sup>53</sup> There is little support for this story by Minh in that pictures revealed a bloody death and their hands tied.<sup>54</sup> In any event, Nhung is assumed to be the executioner,<sup>55</sup> but only one account blames Minh for giving the order, although it might be expected that an aide to a general would be so acting.<sup>56</sup>

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1030 hours

The bodies of Diem and Nhu are at JGS, but Conein declines to view them for fear of the damage a leak of his having done so could do to U.S. interests.<sup>57</sup>

D. The Five Million Piastres

The decision for the CIA to pass along funds to the coup leaders may have been a point of discussion in early October 1963.<sup>58</sup> Lodge mentions that a request for money may be forthcoming and that it should be anticipated.<sup>59</sup> This is interesting as all other available evidence<sup>60</sup> submits that this decision was of such relative insignificance that it could be made by the Station without consultation with Lodge.

Conein received the money on October 24, 1963, and put it into a safe in his house. The money was given to Don for two purposes: (1) to procure rice and bread for troops diverted from supplies; and (2) to pay death benefits to those killed during the coup (Conein claims there is no insurance in Vietnam and that this was a customary practice).<sup>61</sup>

The only observation that this question poses is the laxity of payment by the CIA of a sizeable amount of the money.

E. The Twenty-four Hour Airplane Delay

The only remaining question in the conduct of the U.S. Government during the November 1 coup is whether Lodge's unwillingness or inability to obtain safe conduct for Diem and Nhu indicates some involvement in or knowledge of the assassination of the two that is not apparent on the face of available records.

On October 30, 1963, Lodge notifies Washington that they should anticipate a request by key personalities for evacuation. Lodge suggests Saipan as a depository for the asylees as its absence of press and communications would allow policy makers time to make further disposition. Lodge recognizes that a request for asylum in the Saigon Embassy is not unlikely also and hopes that the new government will help him resolve this.<sup>62</sup>

Conein was the go-between for securing an airplane for Diem and Nhu. He was first asked by Minh and Don, after Minh's phone conversation with Diem shortly after 6 o'clock in the morning, November 2, 1963. Conein called Smith at the Embassy and was told in an unusually orderly and responsive fashion that Diem would be taken to the first country that offered asylum and that they did not want to land in a country other than the one which was granting asylum.

At some point, Conein was also advised that the C-130, which was the only airplane available in Vietnam, could not fly far enough to land in New Delhi, Karachi, or Tehran, and that 24 hours would be needed to get a KC-135 from Guam. Conein then passed all this information on to Don.<sup>63</sup> The reasons given for the 24 hour delay was that the pilots in Guam would have to be briefed on their route and that the airport would have to be opened.<sup>64</sup>

This whole incident casts a pall over American involvement in the assassinations of Diem and Nhu. Evidence presently available is unsatisfactory to explain away what is considered to be the last lingering doubt of U.S. having any hand in the killings. For this reason, it is recommended that the Committee examine McGeorge Bundy on the issue and consider whether further investigation is warranted.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Marguerite Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare (Harper and Row, 1965), p. 91 (hereinafter cited as Higgins).
2. Higgins, pp. 91-92.
3. Higgins, pp. 95-96.
4. Hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, June 20, 1975 (hereinafter cited as Hearings, with person and date), at pp. 42-44, Conein.
5. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 43.
6. Higgins, p. 100.
7. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, Exhibit 1, p. 10.
8. Ibid.
9. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 21.
10. Higgins, p. 181.
11. Deptel 243, received from White House (WH), July 3, 1975.
12. Higgins, p. 196.
13. Deptel 243, received from WH, July 3, 1975. Having used the quoted phrase, Hilsman later (Deptel 249) queries Lodge as to its meaning.
14. Ibid.
15. CIA I.G. Report (hereinafter cited as I.G.), Part C, 1967, pp. 7-8.
16. Ibid., p. 8.
17. Ibid., p. 9.
18. Ibid., p. 11. Higgins, however, claims that Roswell Gilpatric, Acting Secretary of Defense, was telephoned and gave his assent. Higgins, p. 196.
19. Ibid., p. 18.
20. Ibid., p. 15.

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21. This is the inference drawn from a cable (Saigon Embassy, Number 577) from Lodge to State, on September 22, 1963, noting that the Country Team is not speaking with one voice and requesting guidance in light of imminent visit of Taylor and Maxwell to Diem. Also, paragraph 4, Lodge cable from Saigon CIA, number 2023, October 29, 1963, reporting on Conein meeting with Minh, who complains that "other Americans should quit talking to Colonels and Majors (Vietnamese) about coup action...." An interesting sidelight to this entire study is the division within the U.S. Government, with State and certain National Security Council staff maintaining a "Diem-must-go" attitude, while DoD and CIA believe that the issue is in the countryside, not in Saigon and Hue. Cf., for example, Hearings, Colby, June 20, 1975, p. 65.
22. CIA Saigon (Lodge) cable, number 2114, to Secretary of State and others, dated October 31, 1963.
23. CIA Saigon (Lodge) cable, number 2023, to Secretary of State and others, dated October 29, 1963.
24. Saigon Embassy (Lodge) cable, number 403, to Secretary of State, dated September 2, 1963.
25. Saigon Embassy (Lodge) cable, number 505, to Secretary of State, dated September 13, 1963. Cf., also I.G., pp. 21-22, where McCone complains that Lodge has had little contact with Diem and has not been out of Saigon.
26. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 25. But Minh stated that Diem is to be kept in office. Other two alternatives envision (a) encirclement of Saigon by various military units and (b) direct confrontation between military units involved in the coup and loyalist units. I.G., pp. 27-28.
27. I.G., p. 28.
28. Hearings, McCone, June 6, 1975, p. 60. (Colby drafted this for McCone. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 35.)
29. Ibid., p. 62.
30. I.G., p. 28.
31. I.G., p. 29.
32. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 37. It should be pointed out that Colby stated at the Hearings, June 20, 1975, at p. 58, that Conein was not aware of McCone's instructions at his next meeting with Minh

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(not Don — Conein was confused as to who he instructed) and therefore did not pass on decision to him. Conein could not explain why he had not included his discussion with Don in an otherwise exhaustive after-action report. Hearings, June 20, 1975, pp. 37-38.

33. I.G., p. 37.
34. CIA Saigon cable (Lodge) to State, number 2129, dated November 1, 1963.
35. MACV Cable (Harkins) to JCS, number 8512, dated November 1, 1963.
36. I.G., p. 40.
37. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, Exhibit 1 (hereinafter simply Exhibit), p. 15.
38. Exhibit, p. 14.
39. Ibid., p. 17.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 18.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
45. Ibid., p. 23.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., p. 25.
49. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, pp. 58-59. This story is bolstered by a summary of speculative stories contained in a Saigon Embassy cable (Lodge), number 888, to State, dated November 2, 1963, at p. 3.
50. Saigon Embassy cable (Lodge), number 888, to State, at p. 1.
51. Higgins, pp. 216-219.
52. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 56.
53. Higgins, p. 219.

54. I.G., p. 43.
55. I.G., p. 43.
56. Higgins, p. 219.
57. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 58.
58. Hearings, Colby, June 20, 1975, p. 22.
59. Saigon Station Cable (Lodge), number 2040, to State, dated October 29, 1963, and number 2063, dated October 30, 1963.
60. I.G., p. 41, and Hearings, Colby, June 20, 1975, p. 23.
61. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 72.
62. Saigon Station Cable (Lodge), number 2063, dated October 30, 1963.
63. Hearings, Conein, June 20, 1975, p. 54.
64. Ibid., pp. 76-78.

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