

E. DIEM

1. SUMMARY

South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, were assassinated during a coup by Vietnamese generals on November 2, 1963. Evidence before the Committee indicates that the United States government offered encouragement for the coup, but neither desired nor was involved in the assassinations. Rather, Diem's assassination appears to have been a spontaneous act by Vietnamese generals, engendered by anger at Diem for refusing to resign or put himself in the custody of the leaders of the coup.

On one occasion, General Duong Van Minh ("Big Minh") outlined to a CIA officer the possible assassination of Nhu and another brother, Ngo Dinh Can, as one of three methods being considered for changing the government in the near future. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and Deputy Chief of Mission William Trueheart¹ were informed of this possibility by the Saigon Chief of Station, who recommended that "we do not set ourselves irrevocably against the assassination plot, since the other two alternatives mean either a bloodbath in Saigon or a protracted struggle which would rip the Army and the country assunder." (CIA cable, Saigon Station to DCI, 10/5/63) Upon being informed, Director McCone sent two cables. The first stated "[w]e cannot be in the position of stimulating, approving, or supporting assassination," and the second directed that the recommendation be withdrawn because "we cannot be in position actively condoning such course of action and thereby engaging our responsibility therefor." (CIA cable, DCI to Saigon, 10/5/63; CIA cable, DCI to Saigon, 10/6/63)

2. THE ABORTIVE COUP OF AUGUST 1963

On May 8, 1963, South Vietnamese troops in the City of Hue fired on Buddhists celebrating Buddha's birthday (and carrying the Buddhist flag contrary to edicts proscribing the flying of religious flags) killing nine and wounding fourteen. This incident triggered a nationwide Buddhist protest and a sharp loss of popular confidence in the Diem regime.²

On May 18, United States Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting met with Diem and outlined steps which the United States desired him to take to redress the Buddhist grievances and recapture public confi-

¹ Trueheart is currently a consultant to the Select Committee.

² Senator Gravel Edition, *The Pentagon Papers*, The Defense Department History of United States Decision-making on Vietnam, pp. 207-208, Volume II, Beacon Press, Boston (hereinafter cited as *Pentagon Papers*). Former Public Affairs Officer of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, John Mecklin, in his book, *Mission in Torment*, An Intimate Account of the U.S. Role in Vietnam, Doubleday and Company, 1965 (hereinafter cited as Mecklin), at pages 158-60 described the vulnerability of the Buddhists to Communist infiltration during this period noting that it "offered a classic opportunity for a Communist sleeper play."

dence. These steps included admitting responsibility for the Hue incident, compensating the victims, and reaffirming religious equality in the country. On June 8, Madame Nhu, the wife of Diem's brother, Nhu, publicly accused the Buddhists of being infiltrated with Communist agents. Trueheart, in the absence of Ambassador Nolting protested her remarks to Diem and threatened to disassociate the United States from any repressive measures against the Buddhists in the future. (Pentagon Papers, p. 308) Shortly thereafter, Madame Nhu commented on the self-immolation of Quang Duc and other Buddhist monks by stating that she would like to furnish mustard for the monks' barbecue. On June 12, Trueheart told Diem that Quang Duc's suicide had shocked the world and again warned that the United States would break with his government if he did not solve the Buddhist problem. (Pentagon Papers, p. 208)

Lucien Conein, a CIA officer in Saigon,¹ testified that the Buddhist uprisings were the catalyst that ultimately brought down the Diem regime. (Conein, 6/20/75, pp. 42-44) These events led the United States to apply "direct, relentless, and tablehammering pressure on Diem such as the United States has seldom before attempted with a sovereign friendly government." (Mecklin, p. 169)

By July 4, 1963, Generals Minh, Don, Kim, and Khiem had agreed on the necessity for a coup.²

In his final meeting on August 14 with Ambassador Nolting, Diem agreed to make a public statement offering concessions to the Buddhists. This statement took the form of an interview with the columnist, Marguerite Higgins, in which Diem asserted that his policy toward the Buddhists had always been conciliatory and asked for harmony and support of the government.

Shortly after midnight on August 21, 1963, Nhu ordered forces loyal to him to attack pagodas throughout Vietnam, arresting monks and sacking the sacred buildings. Over thirty monks were injured and 1,400 arrested. The American Embassy was taken by surprise and viewed the attacks as a shattering repudiation of Diem's promises to Nolting. (Pentagon Papers, p. 210)³

On August 24, 1963, the State Department sent a cable (Deptel 243) to the new Ambassador in Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge. The telegram was prepared by Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, and Under Secretary of State Averell Harriman, and was approved by President Kennedy. (Pentagon Papers, p. 235) Deptel 243 told Lodge to press Diem to take "prompt dramatic actions" to redress the grievances of the Buddhists:

We must at same time also tell key military leaders that US would find it impossible to continue support GVN [South Vietnamese Government] militarily and economically unless above steps are taken immediately which we recognize re-

¹ Conein testified that he had known the generals involved in the coup "for many years. Some of them I had known back even in World War II. Some of them were in powerful positions, and I was able to talk to them on a person to person basis, not as a government official." (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 17.)

² Conein's After-Action Report stated that: "The majority of the officers, including General Minh, desired President Diem to have honorable retirement from the political scene in South Vietnam and exile. As to Ngo Dinh Nhu and Ngo Dinh Can, there was never dissention. The attitude was that their deaths, along with Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, would be welcomed." (Conein After-Action Report, 11/1/63, p. 10.)

³ Conein testified that the raids might have been timed to occur when no American Ambassador was in Vietnam (Nolting had left a few days before and his replacement, Henry Cabot Lodge, had not yet arrived) (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 21).

quires removal of the Nhus from the scene. We wish give Diem reasonable opportunity to remove Nhus but if he remains obdurate, then we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem. You may also tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism * * *. Concurrently with above, Ambassador and country teams should urgently examine all possible alternative leadership and make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary.

A cable on August 25 reported the result of a conference among a station representative, Lodge, Trueheart, General Harkins [Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)] and General Weede (Chief of Staff, MACV). They accepted Deptel 243 "as a basic decision from Washington and would proceed to do their best to carry out instructions," (I.G. Report, C, pp. 7-8) but believed that Diem would refuse to remove his brother from his position in the government.

Early in the morning of August 26, 1963, the Voice of America in South Vietnam placed the blame on Nhu for the August 21 raids and absolved the army. The broadcast also reported speculation that the United States contemplated suspending aid to the South Vietnamese Government.¹ (Pentagon Papers, p. 212) Later on that same day, Lodge presented his credentials to Diem. CIA officer Conein and another CIA officer were told to see Generals Khiem and Khanh, respectively, and to convey to them the substance of Deptel 243, but to remind them that "We cannot be of any help during initial action of assuming power of state. Entirely their own action, win or lose." (DCI to Saigon, 8/26/63).

A message from the White House on August 29 authorized Harkins to confirm to the Vietnamese generals that the United States would support a coup if it had a good chance of succeeding, but did not involve United States armed forces. Lodge was authorized to suspend United States aid at his discretion. (Deptel 272, 8/29/63) A cable from the President to Lodge on the same day stated:

I have approved all the messages you are receiving from others today, and I emphasize that everything in these messages has my full support. We will do all that we can to help you conclude this operation successfully. Until the very moment of the go signal for the operation by the Generals, I must reserve a contingent right to change course and reverse previous instructions. While fully aware of your assessment of the consequences of such a reversal, I know from experience that failure is more destructive than an appearance of indecision. I would, of course, accept full responsibility for any such change as I must also bear the full responsibility for this operation and its consequences. (Cable, President Kennedy to Lodge 8/29/63)

In a reply cable, Lodge stated:

1. I fully understand that you have the right and responsibility to change course at any time. Of course I will always respect that right.

2. To be successful, this operation must be essentially a Vietnamese affair with a momentum of its own. Should this happen you may not be able to control it, i.e., the "go signal" may be given by the generals. (Cable, Lodge to President Kennedy, 8/30/63)

¹ In a cable to Harriman, Lodge complained that the VOA broadcast had "complicated our already difficult problem" by eliminating "the possibility of the generals' effort achieving surprise." Lodge further warned that "the US must not appear publicly in the matter, thus giving the 'kiss of death' to its friends" (Cable, Lodge to Harriman, 8/26/63).

A cable from Saigon dated August 31, 1963, stated :

This particular coup is finished. Generals did not feel ready and did not have sufficient balance of forces. There is little doubt that GVN [South Vietnamese Government] aware US role and may have considerable detail. (CIA Cable, Sta. to Hq. 8/31/63)

Deptel 243 and the VOA broadcast set the tone for later relations between the United States representatives and the generals. Big Minh, who had initial doubts about the strength of American support, grew in confidence.

3. THE NOVEMBER 1963 COUP

American dissatisfaction with the Diem regime became increasingly apparent. On September 8, AID Director David Bell, in a television interview, stated that Congress might cut aid to South Vietnam if the Diem government did not change its course. (Pentagon Papers, p. 214) Lodge suggested a study to determine the most effective methods of cutting aid to topple the regime. (Pentagon Papers, p. 214) On September 12, with White House approval, Senator Church introduced a resolution in the Senate condemning the South Vietnamese Government for its repressive handling of the Buddhist problem and calling for an end to United States aid unless the oppressive measures were curtailed. (Pentagon Papers, pp. 214-215)

In mid-September 1963, two proposals for dealing with Diem were considered by the Administration. The first contemplated increasingly severe pressure to bring Diem in line with American policy; the second involved acquiescing in Diem's actions, recognizing that Diem and Nhu were inseparable, and attempting to salvage as much as possible. It was decided to adopt the first proposal, and to send Secretary of Defense McNamara and General Taylor on a fact-finding mission to Vietnam. (Pentagon Papers, p. 215)

On October 2, McNamara and Taylor returned to Washington and presented their findings to the National Security Council. Their report confirmed that the military effort was progressing favorably, but warned of the dangers inherent in the political turmoil and recommended bringing pressure against Diem. This pressure would include announcing the withdrawal of 1,000 American troops by the end of the year, ending support for the forces responsible for the pagoda raids, and continuing Lodge's policy of remaining aloof from the regime. The report recommended against a coup, but suggested that alternative leadership should be identified and cultivated. The recommendations were promptly approved by the President. (Pentagon Papers, pp. 215-216)

On October 3, Conein contacted Minh. Minh explained that a coup was being planned, and requested assurances of American support if it were successful. Minh outlined three courses of action¹ one of which was the assassination of Diem's brothers, Nhu and Can. (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 25; cable, Saigon to Director, 10/5/63) The Station cabled on October 5 that it had recommended to Lodge that "we do not set ourselves irrevocably against the assassination plot, since the other two alternatives mean either a blood bath in Saigon or a protracted struggle." (Cable, Saigon to Director, 10/5/63)

¹ The other courses of action were the encirclement of Saigon by various military units and direct confrontation between military units involved in the coup and loyalist units.

A cable from the CIA Director to Saigon responded that:

(W)e certainly cannot be in the position of stimulating, approving, or supporting assassination, but on the other hand, we are in no way responsible for stopping every such threat of which we might receive even partial knowledge. We certainly would not favor assassination of Diem. We believe engaging ourselves by taking position on this matter opens door too easily for probes of our position re others, re support of regime, et cetera. Consequently believe best approach is hands off. "However, we naturally interested in intelligence on any such plan."¹

McCone testified that he met privately with the President and the Attorney General, taking the position that "our role was to assemble all information on intelligence as to what was going on and to report it to the appropriate authorities, but to not attempt to direct it." (McCone, 6/6/75, p. 62) He believed the United States should maintain a "hands off attitude." (McCone, 6/6/75, p. 62) McCone testified:

I felt that the President agreed with my position, despite the fact that he had great reservations concerning Diem and his conduct. I urged him to try to bring all the pressure we could on Diem to change his ways, to encourage more support throughout the country. My precise words to the President, and I remember them very clearly, was that "Mr. President, if I was manager of a baseball team, I had one pitcher, I'd keep him in the box whether he was a good pitcher or not." By that I was saying that, if Diem was removed we would have not one coup but we would have a succession of coups and political disorder in Vietnam and it might last several years and indeed it did. (McCone, 6/6/75, pp. 62-63)

McCone stated that he did not discuss assassination with the President, but rather "whether we should let the coup go or use our influences not to." He left the meeting believing that the President agreed with his "hands-off" recommendation. (McCone, 6/6/75, pp. 62-63) McCone cabled the Station on October 6:

McCone directs that you withdraw recommendation to ambassador (concerning assassination plan) under McCone instructions, as we cannot be in position actively condoning such course of action and thereby engaging our responsibility therefore (Cable, CIA to Saigon, 10/6/63)

In response, the CIA Station in Saigon cabled Headquarters:

Action taken as directed. In addition, since DCM Trueheart was also present when original recommendation was made, specific withdrawal of recommendation at McCone's instruction was also conveyed to Trueheart. Ambassador Lodge commented that he shares McCone's opinion. (Cable, Saigon to CIA, 10/7/63)

Conein, the CIA official who dealt directly with the Generals,² testified that he was first told of McCone's response to the assassination alternative by Ambassador Lodge around October 20. (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 35) Conein testified (but did not so indicate in his detailed After-Action Report) that he then told General Don that the United States opposed assassination, and that the General responded, "Alright, you don't like it, we won't talk about it anymore." (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 36)

¹ Colby, who was then Chief, Far Eastern Division, drafted this cable for McCone. Colby testified:

"Q. So you were on notice as of that date that the Director personally opposed any involvement by the CIA in an assassination?"

"COLBY. I certainly was." (Colby, 6/20/75, p. 57)

² Conein described his role as follows: "My job was to convey the orders from my Ambassador and the instructions from my Ambassador to the people who were planning the coup, to monitor those individuals who were planning the coup, to get as much information so that our government would not be caught with their pants down." (Conein, 6/20/75, pp. 38-39)

The United States increased pressure on Diem to mend his ways. On October 17, General Richard Stillwell (MACV operations chief) informed Secretary Thuan that the United States was suspending aid to the Special Forces units responsible for the pagoda raids until they were transferred to the field and placed under Joint General Staff (JGS) command. (Pentagon Papers, p. 217) On October 27, Lodge traveled to Dalat with Diem, but did not receive any commitment from Diem to comply with American requests. (Pentagon Papers, p. 219)

On October 28, Conein met with General Don, who had received assurance from Lodge that Conein spoke for the United States. Don said that he would make the plans for the coup available to the Ambassador four hours before it took place, and suggested that Lodge not change his plans to go to the United States on October 31. (I.G. Report, C, p. 37; Pentagon Papers, p. 219)

On October 30, Lodge reported to Washington that he was powerless to stop the coup, and that the matter was entirely in Vietnamese hands. General Harkins disagreed and cabled his opposition to the coup to General Taylor. (Pentagon Papers, p. 220) A cable from Bundy to Lodge dated October 30 expressed White House concern and stated that "[w]e cannot accept conclusion that we have no power to delay or discourage a coup." (Cable, Bundy to Lodge, 10/30/63) A subsequent cable on that same day from Washington instructed Lodge to intercede with the Generals to call off the coup if he did not believe it would succeed. The instructions prescribed "strict non-involvement and somewhat less strict neutrality." (Pentagon Papers, p. 220)

Late in the morning of November 1, the first units involved in the coup began to deploy around Saigon. The Embassy was given only four minutes warning before the coup began. (Cable, MACV to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 11/1/63) An aide to Don told Conein to bring all available money to the Joint General Staff headquarters. Conein brought 3 million piasters (approximately \$42,000) to the headquarters, which was given to Don to procure food for his troops and to pay death benefits to those killed in the coup. (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 72)¹

Conein was at the Joint General Staff headquarters during most of the coup. (I.G. Report, C, pp. 41-42) At 1:40 p.m., the Generals proposed that Diem resign immediately, and guaranteed him and Nhu safe departure. (Conein After-Action Report, p. 15) The palace was surrounded shortly afterwards, and at 4:30 p.m. the Generals announced the coup on the radio and demanded the resignation of Diem and Nhu. Diem called Lodge and inquired about the United States' position. Lodge responded that the United States did not yet have a view, and expressed concern for Diem's safety. (Pentagon Papers, p. 221)

According to Conein's report, Minh told Nhu that if he and Diem did not resign within five minutes, the palace would be bombed. Minh then phoned Diem. Diem refused to talk with him and Minh ordered the bombing of the palace. Troops moved in on the palace, but Diem still refused to capitulate. Minh offered Diem a second chance to sur-

¹ Passing money to the coup leaders was considered sometime prior to the coup. On October 29, Lodge cabled that a request for funds should be anticipated. (Cables, Lodge to State, 10/29/63, and 10/30/63) Conein received the money on October 24, and kept it in a safe in his house.

render half an hour later, telling him that if he refused he would be "blasted off of the earth." Shortly before nightfall an air assault was launched on the Presidential Guard's barracks. (Conein After-Action Report, 11/1/63, pp. 17-18)

At 6:20 on the morning of November 2, Diem called General Don at the Joint General Staff headquarters and offered to surrender if he and Nhu were given safe conduct to an airport. Shortly afterwards, Diem offered to surrender unconditionally and ordered the Presidential Guard to cease firing. According to Conein, an escort for Diem appeared in front of the palace at 8:00 a.m., but Diem and Nhu were not present. (Conein After-Action Report, 11/1/63, p. 24)

Conein testified that he left the JGS headquarters amidst preparations by the Vietnamese generals to house Diem and Nhu there under proper security. After his return home he received a telephone call and was told to come to the Embassy. At the Embassy he was told that orders had come from the President of the United States to locate Diem. He further testified that he returned to JGS headquarters about 10:30 a.m. and asked General Big Minh where Diem was. After some discussion, Conein stated, Minh said that they were behind the General Staff Headquarters, but professed that they had died by their own hand. Minh offered to show the bodies to Conein but Conein declined because he feared that doing so might damage United States interests. (Conein, 6/20/75, pp. 55-57).

The details of Diem's and Nhu's deaths are not known.¹ There is no available evidence to give any indication of direct or indirect involvement of the United States.²

¹ Conein speculated that Diem and Nhu escaped through a tunnel from the palace and fled to a Catholic Church in Cholon. He opined that an informant must have identified them and called the General Staff headquarters. (Conein After-Action Report, 1/11/63, p. 23) A CIA source stated that Diem and Nhu had left the palace the previous evening with a Chinese businessman and arrived at the church at 8:00 on the morning of November 2. Ten minutes later they were picked up by soldiers and forced into an army vehicle. (Cable, Saigon to State, 11/2/63) Minh originally told Conein that Diem and Nhu had committed suicide, but Conein doubted that Catholics would have taken their own lives in a church. (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 56) The Inspector General's Report states that on November 16, 1963, a field-grade officer of unknown reliability gave the CIA two photographs of the bodies of Diem and Nhu in which it appeared their hands were tied behind their backs. (I.G. Report, C, pp. 43-44) The source reported that Diem and Nhu had been shot and stabbed while being conveyed to the Joint General Staff headquarters.

² It must be noted that on October 30, 1963, Ambassador Lodge notified Washington that there might be a request by key leaders for evacuation, and suggested Saigon as a point for evacuation. (Cable, Saigon to Washington, 10/30/63) Conein was charged with obtaining the airplane. Between 6:00 and 7:00 on the morning of November 2, Minh and Don asked Conein to procure an aircraft. Conein relayed the request to a Station Officer at the Embassy who replied that it would not be possible to get an aircraft for the next twenty-four hours, since it would have to be flown from Guam. Conein testified that a Station representative told him that Diem could be flown only to a country that offered him asylum and that the plane could not land in any other country. There were no aircraft immediately available that had sufficient range to reach a potential country of asylum. (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 54)

