

25 November 1963

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: South Vietnam Situation

ATTENDANCE: The President, Secretaries Rusk, McNamara, Ball,
Messrs. Bundy and McCone, Ambassador Lodge
November 24th, 3:00 p.m. - Executive Office Bldg.

1. Ambassador Lodge reported that the change in government had been an improvement, that he was hopeful over the outlook, that he expected a speedup of the war, he thought by February or March we would see marked progress. Lodge stated that we were not involved in the coup, though we put pressures on the South Vietnamese government to change its course and those pressures, most particularly on indications of withdrawal by 1965, encouraged the coup. Lodge stated that there were indications that North Vietnam might be interested in arrangements which would be of a nature satisfactory to us. He did not elaborate. He ~~stated~~ ^{thought} that everybody was very happy after the coup and showed some pictures of the crowds in Saigon. He mentioned that Gen. Don would be here and that those talking with him should influence him to put on all the pressure he could. He spoke most highly of the Papal delegate and his intention to see the Pope on Wednesday. He carried with him a letter from the Papal Delegate and also from the Bishop of Saigon, apparently praising the actions in upsetting the Diem government. Lodge said he saw dangers of an anti-Christian move and this was his purpose in seeing the Pope. He made a point that Bishop Thuc had engaged in serious persecutions involving the imprisonment of a great many people, including three Catholic priests. He also made the point that Can, Diem's brother, also engaged in a variety of activities of persecution and the execution of individuals and that Can had, on his own premises, a burial ground for his victims. Lodge said that we were in no way responsible for the death of Diem and Nhu, that had they followed his advice, they would be alive today. He said that he saved Can from assassination and that Bishop Thuc was out of Saigon under orders from the Papal delegate. (Note: I question whether the Papal delegate can order a Bishop out of a country.) The tone of Ambassador Lodge's statements were optimistic, hopeful, and left the President with the impression that we are on the road to victory.

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At this point McCone stated that our estimate of the situation was somewhat more serious. We had noted a continuing increase in Viet Cong activity since the first of November as evidenced by a larger number of Viet Cong attacks. We also noticed with considerable concern a high level of message volume on the Viet Cong military and political networks and this might quite possibly reflect preparations for further sustained guerrilla pressures. Furthermore I stated that the military were having considerable trouble in completing the political organization of the government and were receiving little if any help from civilian leadership. Indeed it seemed to us that the competent civilians were staying on the sidelines and continuing their traditional role of critics rather than turning in and being helpful. I concluded by stating that we could not at this point or time give a particularly optimistic appraisal of the future.

The President then stated that he approached the situation with some misgivings. He noted that a great many people throughout the country questioned our course of action in supporting the overthrow of the Diem regime. He also noted that strong voices in the Congress felt we should get out of Vietnam. Both of these facts give the President considerable concern. He stated that he was not at all sure that we took the right course in upsetting the Diem regime but this was a decision that he did not have to make as it was a fait accompli. He said now that it was done, we have to see that our objectives were accomplished. (Note: The inferences were that, left to his own devices, he would not have supported the courses of action which led to the coup.)

The President then stated he has never been happy with our operations in Vietnam. He said there had been serious dissension and divisions within the American community and he told the Ambassador that he was in total charge and he wanted the situation cleaned up. He wanted no more divisions of opinion, no more bickering and any person that did not conform to policy should be removed. At this point Mr. Bundy stated that we were searching for a replacement for Truehart and what we wanted was a capable administrator who could run the Country Team. The President again repeated his insistence that the Ambassador was the Number One man and he, the President, was holding the Ambassador personally responsible.

Secretary McNamara stated that he had examined the economic situation and that he felt we must give generously of economic aid and must not ask the South Vietnamese government to do the impossible at this particular time.

The President then said that he supported this, but at the same time he wanted to make it abundantly clear that he did not think we had to reform every Asian into our own image. He said that he felt all too often when we engaged in the affairs of a foreign country we wanted to immediately transform that country into our image and this, in his opinion, was a mistake. He was anxious to get along, win the war - he didn't want as much effort placed on so-called social reforms.

Note: I received in this meeting the first "President Johnson tone" for action as contrasted with the "Kennedy tone". Johnson definitely feels that we place too much emphasis on social reforms; he has very little tolerance with our spending so much time being "do-gooders"; and he has no tolerance whatsoever with bickering and quarreling of the type that has gone on in South Vietnam.

The meeting was followed by a statement to the press which was given out by Bundy to the effect that we would pursue the policies agreed to in Honolulu adopted by the late President Kennedy. A picture was taken of the President with Lodge, McNamara, Rusk and Ball.

JAM (tape)/mfb