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May 7, 1985

Rufus C. Phillips III
6520 Ridge Drive
McLean, VA 22101

Dear Rufus:

I'm editing a book by George McT. Kahin of Cornell, entitled INTERVENTION: How America Became Involved In Vietnam. (You may remember him as co-author of THE UNITED STATES AND VIETNAM, published in the late 60s.) There is a point in his narrative that I thought needed amplification, so that's the reason for his enclosed letter.

If you're willing to respond, please do so directly, or through me. When the book comes out early in the year, I'll be sure to send you a copy -- I think you'll especially find his portrait of Lyndon Johnson very different from the conventional wisdom.

How are you? Last time we talked you were going to get back to the typewriter. I was in Washington last week for the funeral of my stepfather, who had been in Bethesda for four months. I ran into Ben McAlpin recently, first time since JACK APO 72, and I see Peter Thacher when he's in Stonington. And the other day a letter came out of the blue from Jim Halbe.

Best,

Ashbel Green

AG/ph

As to coup prospects, according to Conein, Don indicated that the declaration of martial law was a first phase, but that the secret of future phases was not his to tell. He claimed that, except for some of the younger officers, who criticized him for the action against the Buddhists, he had the support of the generals. Conein received the impression, however, that Don was "not the man behind the whole thing", only "the figurehead" responsible for the first phase.

In response to Conein's more specific questions, Don asserted that General Nguyen Khanh was "100% with him" -- certainly a considerable exaggeration --and, more plausibly, that he also had the support of generals Duong Van Minh, Tran Van Minh, Do Cao Tri, Tran Thien Khiem, and Le Van Kim. With regard to the chain of command in Saigon and its surroundings, he explained that, although General Ton That Dinh was military governor of Saigon/Cholon, he had no authority over the Special Forces, led by Colonel Tung (whose "guts" Don hated), who executed only orders coming from Diem or Nhu.

Conein concluded: "It seems Don himself feels he does not have the power of enough influence over the generals to overthrow the president". It was his strong impression that "General Don is not completely aware of everything that is going on around him... He appears not to know what to do next. He is completely controlled by events and reacts rather than plans next moves".²⁷

On the same day that Conein saw Don, Major General Le Van Kim told Rufus Phillips, Assistant Director of USOM, in charge of its Rural Affairs program, that the U.S. must make a maximum effort to separate the Nhucs from Diem and get the Nhucs out of the country. If the U.S. would take a clear stand against the couple and support army action to remove Nhu from the

government the Army (with the exception of Colonel Thung) could be expected to support such action and be able to carry it through. A similar American stand with the army against the Nhus was urged on Phillips the next morning by Nguyen Dinh Thuan, Diem's Secretary of State. Conceding that it would be difficult to split the Nhus from Diem, he nevertheless felt that the U.S. should attempt this. The U.S. had to exercise leadership and be very firm, otherwise chaos was likely to result. Under no circumstances should it acquiesce in what the Nhus had done.²⁸

Reports of these contacts with Don, Kim, and Thuan, of course, went to Washington as well as to Lodge, who arrived in Saigon only on August 22. When Washington apparently queried him regarding coup prospects, the ambassador's initial response was negative. He cabled that, in view of the loyalty of troop commanders in the Saigon area to Diem and the absence of cohesive military opposition to the regime, American support for a coup attempt would be "a shot in the dark".²⁹

If, as Conein reported, General Don did not know "what to do next", he and a number other key generals were soon left in no doubt as to the Kennedy administration's prescriptions. The State Department's instructions endorsed by the President were cabled to Lodge on August 24³⁰ with the request that their central points be conveyed to the generals. Those points should have increased the willingness of the most careful of these officers to act. Constituting the opening salvo in the administration's frontal assault to bring down the Diem regime, these instructions gave Lodge a wide latitude for action which, despite subsequent spasmodic urgings of caution, were never rescinded.

After acknowledging that Nhu had maneuvered himself into a commanding position, they read: "U.S. Government cannot tolerate situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands". Diem was to be given a chance to rid himself

28. Letter from Rufus Phillips to the author, May 28, 1985

of Nhu and his coterie and replace them with the "best military and political personalities available"; but if he remained "obdurate and refuses, then we must face possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved." The ambassador was instructed to tell "key military leaders" that the U.S. would find it impossible to continue support of the South Vietnamese government "militarily and economically" unless action was immediately taken to redress earlier moves against the Buddhists, a step "which we recognize requires removal of Nhus from the scene." If Diem refused to acquiesce in their removal, then the Kennedy administration was "prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem." Further encouragement for the military to take action was provided in the authority given Lodge to "tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown [of the] central government mechanism." As an initial signal of support, ^{the} Voice of America ~~radio~~ was to broadcast a statement removing the taint on the generals for the pagoda raids and placing the blame squarely on Nhu.⁵³ But initiatives were not to depend on the generals alone. Concurrently, Lodge and his team were instructed to "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." ³¹

The ambassador promptly endorsed these instructions, but asked that they be modified so as to forego any approach to Diem; for any chance of his meeting the demands would be nil, and to approach him would be to alert Nhu and give him, with his control of combat troops in the Saigon area, the opportunity to thwart American plans for action by the dissident generals. "Therefore," Lodge urged, "propose we go straight to the Generals

with our demands without informing Diem. We would tell them we [are] prepared to have Diem without Nhu but it is in effect up to them whether to keep him". This willingness to give the generals leave to oust Diem as well as Nhu gives credence to the conclusion subsequently reached by Rufus Phillips that "Lodge never made any real effort to split Nhu from Diem and that he arrived on the scene with the opinion, which he managed to obscure from most of us, that the only solution to the political problems of Vietnam was to get rid of Diem".³²

Although Lodge informed Washington that Harkins concurred in his message, when the general learned of this, he bitterly remarked that Lodge had "volunteered" his agreement. Nothing in the available record contradicts Harkins' subsequent claim that, though he supported ousting the Nhuses, he never agreed to the removal of Diem. His belief that it was possible to eliminate the Nhuses without at the same time removing Diem from power represented a difference in view not confined to the U.S. mission. It quickly surfaced in Washington as well, where it became clear that McNamara, Taylor, and John McCone held views similar to Harkins' and believed that they should have been more fully and directly consulted in drafting instructions as important as those contained in the August 24 cable. The generals in Saigon soon sensed the existence of such a cleavage. Already distrustful of Harkins, apparently because of his personal intervention to dissuade Diem's top aide, Nguyen Dinh Thuan, from resigning in protest over repression of the Buddhists, they now concluded that either he or the CIA's station chief, John Richardson, had alerted Nhu to the revived coup planning.³³

Initially, however, several of the anti-regime military leaders were encouraged by what Lodge conveyed to them of his new instructions from Washington. The Pham Ngoc Thao-Do Mau group, enrolling the backing of a significant number of junior officers, but apparently able to count on the initial support of only a few marine battalions and some other small units

32. ~~Id~~ Same as fl. n. 28.

Marine Corps Major General Victor Krulak and Joseph Mendenhall, a senior State Department official, returned after a three day visit on September 10 to present the National Security Council, with the President attending, such diametrically opposed assessments of the military and political situation -- Krulak strongly positive and Mendenhall strongly negative -- as to prompt Kennedy to quip, "You both did visit the same country, didn't you?" ⁵⁰

At this meeting Rufus Phillips, currently head^{of} AID's Rural Assistance Program and who had served in Vietnam from 1954-56 with Lansdale, strongly supported Mendenhall's bleak assessment. He emphasised that the deterioration was true not only in the cities but in rural South Vietnam as well, where in the IV Corps area the strategic hamlet program was collapsing. Arguing that the United States could not acquiesce in the actions Nhu had taken or continue to work with him, he held that there was a chance of saving Diem's regime by splitting Nhu from Diem and that General Lansdale was the only American with sufficient influence with Diem to accomplish this. Kennedy did not act upon this plea ^{that} ~~that~~ Lansdale be sent back to Vietnam, but on another matter Phillips appears to have planted an idea that soon took root in the President's calculations. *Responding to* Kennedy's question as to what else he would recommend, he urged a cut-off of U.S. aid to Colonel Tung and his Special Forces, the elite Saigon based unit loyal to ^{Diem and} ~~Nhu~~, which the ^{latter} ~~had~~ just directed to carry out the savage raid against the Buddhist pagodas. ⁵¹

51. NSC, Memorandum of Conference with the President, September 10, 1960 2m - Subject: Vietnam, prepared by Branley Smith (5 pp., 10 lines sanitized.)