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September 10, 1963

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Murrow

FROM : John Mecklin, PAO, Saigon
SUBJECT : A Policy for Viet-Nam

What follows is based on six assumptions, all of them controversial, which will be discussed at length separately if desired. They are:

1. A new Vietnamese government is essential.

There is mounting evidence that the war cannot be won with the present regime, especially in view of the damage done to popular support during the Buddhist crisis. Even if the present regime can win, with continued U.S. aid, the point has become irrelevant. International and U.S. domestic public opinion probably would deny the U.S. the option of trying again. Such a try would also be an unacceptable humiliation of U.S. prestige after our present open effort to remove the Nhus from Viet-Nam.

2. Real power must go to a new man.

The focus of present indignation has been the Nhus. In fact, Nhu and his wife are as much symptoms of the GVN's shortcomings as they have been a cause. The true failure over the years to rally the Vietnamese people must be blamed on Diem himself. He has always controlled the power base, perhaps even now. Because of Diem's peculiar, rather neurotic relationship with Nhu, it is to be expected furthermore that Nhu's removal would simply force Diem deeper into suspicious isolation, making him more ineffective than ever. He should be retained only as a figurehead in the interest of stability.

SECRET

3. The odds are heavily against ousting the Ngo Dinh without considerable bloodshed.

The regime over the years has built up powerful loyal forces which are now concentrated around Saigon. To prevent a prolonged deadlock, and thus an opportunity for the VC to make unacceptable gains, there is only one sure recourse: an advance decision to introduce U.S. combat forces if necessary.

4. An unlimited U.S. commitment in Viet-Nam is justified.

This specifically means the use of U.S. combat forces if necessary, both to promote unseating of the regime and against the VC, as well as a willingness to accept an engagement comparable with Korea if the Communists choose to escalate. Shock waves from loss of Viet-Nam to Communism would be disastrous throughout Southeast Asia, which is strategically vital to U.S. security. Conversely, this kind of strong and successful U.S. resort to force would strengthen resistance to Communism throughout Asia and other undeveloped areas. It would also be a significant defeat of the critical Chinese test in Viet-Nam of their ideology on war.

5. U.S. forces could be used against Asian Communist guerrillas and win. (And the stakes are so high that if unavoidable we must take the risk anyway.)

What might be called the French syndrome is wholly fallacious. The French lost in Indo-China because they behaved like colonialists, failed even to try to engage the people and never made an adequate military effort in any case. U.S. forces in Viet-Nam would be used contrarily to help the people, i.e. to carry out policies now in effect but often botched. Their presence and example would quickly inspire better leadership and initiative among the Vietnamese forces, as indeed was the experience in Korea.

6. The U.S. must accept the risks of covertly organizing a coup if necessary.

The available evidence indicates that there is a deep reluctance in the Vietnamese officer corps to accept the hazards of promoting a coup d'etat. It is therefore possible that action to topple the Ngo Dinh regime would not automatically follow even

the most severe U.S. measures, e.g. suspension of aid, with resulting near chaos. It is also essential that the eventual successor regime be willing to cooperate with the U.S., including commitment of U.S. combat forces if the war can be won no other way.

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In the writer's judgment, conditions in Viet-Nam have deteriorated so badly that the U.S. would be drawing to a three-card straight to gamble its interests there on anything short of an ultimate willingness to use U.S. combat troops. Even if all-out pressures succeeded in unseating the Ngo. Dinh, which is not an automatic certainty, at least not immediately, there is real danger that the successor regime would be equally or even more ineffective against the VC. There is also the danger that the Vietnamese military forces would fragment, dividing the country into rival camps, with disastrous consequences.

If we are not willing to resort to U.S. forces, it is wholly possible that efforts to unseat the Ngo Dinh would produce results that would be worse, from the U.S. viewpoint, than a negotiated 'neutral' settlement. It is also possible that a prolonged deadlock would stimulate an irresistible shift in international and American public opinion in favor of such a settlement.

On the other hand, a decision now to use U.S. forces if necessary would give the whole U.S. effort psychological lift, producing confidence that we need not be frustrated indefinitely, giving us a sure hand that has been lacking in the past. When and if it became desireable to make this intention public, we would have a lever of immense value vis-a-vis the Vietnamese. Such a new sureness in our actions, with the clear implication that the U.S. 'means business,' would quickly get through to the Vietnamese and to third countries and thus conceivably itself remove the need to resort to force.

Perhaps it should also be noted that the present situation in Viet-Nam is confronting the U.S. with what was certainly an inevitable showdown on the thesis that Western industrial power somehow must always be frustrated by Communist guerrilla tactics applied against a weak, underdeveloped government that refused

foreign advice and reforms of the very ills that the Communists live on. There are incipient insurrections of this sort all over the underdeveloped world and the outcome in Viet-Nam will have critical bearing on U.S. capability to prevent and/or suppress them.

In the writer's opinion, furthermore, there is a very real possibility that if and as Viet-Nam is conclusively being lost to the Communists, the U.S. will be forced to use force in any case as a last resort...just as we did so unexpectedly in Korea. It would be vastly wiser--and more effective--to make this unpalatable decision now.

From this basis of strength, U.S. policy should seek establishment of a new government that would be as strong as possible but in any case would accept introduction of U.S. forces if necessary to defeat the VC. Ideally the whole Ngo Dinh family should be removed, but the U.S. would accept retention of Diem in a figurehead role. It is essential that the Nhus leave the country permanently. (A specific time period, say six months, would not be sufficient since their influence and political apparatus would survive.)

Application of this policy should be on a step-by-step basis, thus hopefully achieving U.S. ends with minimum damage to the war effort against the VC. Recommended procedure:

1. For the short term, continuation of the present heavy diplomatic pressure on the GVN. This would be designed to combine with outside events--congressional threats to cut aid, increased third country pressures in Saigon, UN censure, and perhaps even a world-wide trend toward consideration of DeGaulle's proposals--to force Diem and the Nhus to capitulate voluntarily and/or precipitate a spontaneous military coup.

It is suggested that such pressure be developed with an eye to giving Diem some kind of face-saving escape. Perhaps, for example, the U.S. should begin talking publicly about ousting the whole family, so that it eventually could compromise on departure of only the Nhus with the explanation the Diem had been 'mislead' or some such. With Orientals in general and notably with the Ngo Dinh, capitulation is virtually impossible if they are painted into a corner.

2. When this fails, as is probable, application of selected cuts in U.S. assistance, preferably through imposition of conditions on its use rather than outright surgery....which would have the same effect. The cuts should be applied to items of minimum importance to the war effort against the VC and maximum importance to the Nhus' political maneuvering, e.g. the Special Forces. The cuts should be widely publicized and in fact be chosen more for their psychological impact than expectation of serious damage to GVN operations.

If this did not quickly produce a spontaneous coup, the U.S. should begin covertly planning one. At this point dramatic deterioration of U.S.-GVN relations must be expected, with distinct physical danger to U.S. nationals and a virtual standstill in the advisory effort.

3. Suspension of all aid to the GVN and if this also failed to unseat the regime, implementation as quietly as possible of the planned coup. If this also failed, or only partly succeeded, there should be plentiful excuses to bring in U.S. forces, e.g. to restore order, protect American citizens etc. Such forces should be prepared for attack by loyal GVN troops, but it is more likely that they would simply act as power in being, making it possible now for the U.S. to have its way by simply presenting the Ngo Dinh with an ultimatum. Something similar to this happened when U.S. forces were introduced into Lebanon in 1958--with notably little resulting damage to the U.S. political position in the Middle East.

It is suggested that third country hostility toward the Ngo Dinh is already so considerable that this kind of reluctant, gradual but persistently determined application of U.S. power would similarly be accepted in Asia. And once U.S. forces had been introduced into Viet-Nam, it would be relatively simple--on the invitation of the new regime--to keep them on hand to help, if needed, in final destruction of the Viet Cong.