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Chapter 8: The Fall of Diem
May, 1963 - November, 1963

5/8/63 Buddhist Controversy erupts as GVN troops fire on demonstrators in Hue, killing 9 and wounding 14. Long standing antipathy towards GVN turns into active opposition.

5/18/63 Nolting meets with Diem to outline steps U.S. wants Diem to take to redress Buddhist grievances and recapture public confidence. These include admission of responsibility for the Hue incident, compensation of the victims and a reaffirmation of religious equality and non-discrimination.

6/4/63 With Nolting on leave, Truehart meets with Secretary of State Thuan and, on instructions from State, warns that U.S. support could not be maintained if there were further suppression of the Buddhists.

6/8/63 Madame Nhu publicly accuses Buddhists of being infiltrated with communist agents.

6/11/63 Buddhist monk commits suicide by self-immolation.

6/12/63 Truehart protests to Diem about his lack of action on the Buddhist problem. If Diem does not act, U.S. will forced to disassociate itself from him.

6/16/63 GVN/Buddhist truce (State Airgram A-781 to Embassy Saigon, 10 June). Temporary abatement of GVN/Buddhist hostilities. Truce repudiated almost immediately by both sides.

6/17/63 DIA Intelligence Summary: Military situation is unaffected by the political crisis. GVN prospects for continued counterinsurgency progress "certainly better" than in 1962.

6/27/63 Kennedy announces the appointment of Lodge as U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam.

7/63 Article by Chi Thanh (Lao Dong Party Political Bureau Member and later commander of all Communist forces in the south): "The U.S. is not invincible.... If...one...thinks that firm opposition to U.S. imperialism would touch off a nuclear war, then the only course left would be to compromise with and surrender to U.S. imperialism.... If...we had feared the the United States and had no faith in the success of our struggles against it, we would have called on the people in SVN to 'wait' and 'coexist peacefully' with the U.S.-Diem clique, and committed an irreparable error."

7/3/63 Vice President Tho announces that a preliminary investigation into the May 8 incident has confirmed that the deaths were a result of VC terrorism.

7/4/63 Memorandum of Conversation (Participants: JFK, Ball, Harriman, McGeorge Bundy, Hilsman, Forrestal): "...there was a discussion of the possibility of getting rid of the Nhu's in

which the combined judgment was that it would not be possible." Hilsman acknowledges there is "an element of truth in Diem's view that the Buddhists might push their demands so far as to make his fall inevitable.... Our estimate was that no matter what Diem did there will be coup attempts over the next four months.... Hilsman said that everyone agreed that the chances of chaos in the wake of a coup are considerably less than they were a year ago.... At this point Mr. Forrestal reported on General Krulak's views that, even if there were chaos in Saigon, the military units in the field would continue to confront the Communists.... Mr. Hilsman went on to say that Ambassador Nolting believed the most likely result of a coup attempt that succeeded in killing Diem was civil war..."

7/10/63 SNIE 53-2-63. Conclusions: "A. The Buddhist crisis in SVN has highlighted and intensified a widespread and longstanding dissatisfaction with the Diem regime and its style of government. If -- as is likely -- Diem fails to carry out truly and promptly the commitments he has made to the Buddhists, disorders will probably flare again and the chances of a coup or assassination attempts against him will become better than even. B. The Diem regime's underlying uneasiness about the extent of the U.S. involvement in SVN has been sharpened by the Buddhist affair and the firm line taken by the US. This attitude will almost certainly persist and further pressure to reduce the U.S. presence in the country is likely."

← 8/63 Harkins predicts "the war will be over in December."

8/4/63 DIA Intelligence Summary: VC offensive action high for third consecutive week. VC capitalizing on political crisis.

8/5/63 Buddhist monk commits suicide by self-immolation.

8/14/63 SACSA Memorandum for the Secretary: Discounts importance of increased VC activity.

8/15/63 Buddhist monk commits suicide by self-immolation.

8/18/63 Buddhist monk commits suicide by self-immolation.

8/20/63 On the advice of a small group of generals and Nhu, Diem declares martial law.

8/21/63 Nhu's Special Forces troops attack pagodas in Saigon and Hue, arresting monks and sacking the sacred buildings. More than 30 Buddhists are injured and more than 1,400 arrested.

8/21/63 Director, DIA Memorandum for SecDef: Diem's acts will have "serious repercussions" throughout SVN. Predicts more coup and counter-coup activity. Military ops are so far unaffected.

8/24/63 State to Lodge, Message 243 (Hilsman, Harriman, ~~Forrestal, Ball~~ "end run"): "U.S. government cannot tolerate situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands.... If...Diem remains obdurate and refuses, then we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved.... We must tell key military leaders that U.S. would find it impossible to continue support GVN militarily and economically unless above steps are taken immediately.... You may also tell appropriate military

State to Saigon (Mr CAS 0245, Saigon 329, Saigon 312, Saigon 329)

commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism.... Ambassador and country team should urgently examine all possible alternative leadership.... You will understand that we cannot from Washington give you detailed instructions as to how this operation should proceed, but you will also know we will back you to the hilt on actions you take to achieve our objectives."

8/25/63 Cablegram From Lodge to Rusk: "Believe that chances of Diem meeting our demands are virtually nil.... Propose we go straight to generals with our demands, without informing Diem. Would tell them we prepared have Diem without Nhu but it is in effect up to them whether to keep him."

8/28/63 Cablegram From Richardson to McCone: "Situation here has reached the point of no return.... It is our considered estimate that general officers cannot retreat now.... We believe they will act and have a good chance to win.... If the Ngo family wins now, they and family will stagger to final defeat at the hands of their own people and the VC.... It is obviously preferable that the generals conduct this effort without apparent American assistance.... Nevertheless, we all understand that the effort must succeed and that whatever needs to be done on our part must be done. If this attempt by the generals does not take place or if it fails, we believe it no exaggeration to say that VN runs serious risk of being lost over the course of time."

8/28/63 Taylor to Harkins (Reference State to Saigon 256 8/27)
1. Important White House meeting on subject message scheduled for 1200 28 August EDT. Your views urgently needed on reference message and overall feasibility of operation contemplated in CAS 0346. 2. FYI State to Saigon 243 was prepared without DOD or JCS participation. Authorities are now having second thoughts. 11

8/29/63 Telegram from Rusk to Lodge and Harkins. "USG supports the movement to eliminate the Nhuses from the government, but that before arriving at specific understandings with the Generals, General Harkins must know who are involved, resources available to them and overall plan for coup. The USG will support a coup which has good chance of succeeding but plans no direct involvement of U.S. Armed Forces."

8/29/63 Cablegram from Lodge to Rusk: "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government.... There is no possibility, in my view, that the war can be won under the Diem administration."

8/29/63 Telegram from Rusk to Lodge: Purpose of this message is to explore further question of possible attempt to separate Diem and the Nhuses.

8/29/63 JFK Message to Lodge (EMERGENCY, PERSONAL FOR THE AMBASSADOR FROM THE PRESIDENT, NO DEPARTMENT OR OTHER DISTRIBUTION WHATEVER). 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 we that we can to help you conclude this operation successfully. Nevertheless, there is one point on my own constitutional responsibilities as President and Commander in Chief which I

wish to state to you in this entirely private message, which is not being circulated here beyond the Secretary of State. 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 this operation and its consequences. It is for this reason that I count on you for a continuing assessment of the prospects of success and most particularly desire your candid warning if current course begins to go sour. When we go, we must go to win, but it will be better to change our minds than fail. And if our national interest should require a change of mind we must not be afraid of it. This message requires no direct answer but if you do wish to reply, your answer should be unnumbered and headed "For President Only, Pass White House directly, no other distribution whatever," and referencing White House cite number. 11

8/30/63 Cablegram from Lodge to Rusk: Diem will oppose any attempt to remove the Nhus. "The best chance of doing it is by the generals taking over the government lock, stock and barrel.... It can then be decided whether to put Diem back in again."

8/31/63 Cablegram from Harkins to CJCS. Generals have stopped planning coup because they have insufficient forces under their control in Saigon. Generals do not want to start anything they cannot finish.

8/31/63 Memorandum of State Department Meeting. In a post mortem on the aborted coup, Hilsman presents an intercepted message as evidence that Nhu is negotiating with the north. Nolting expresses the opinion that Nhu will not make a deal with Ho on Ho's terms. Kattenburg feels the war is unwinnable under Diem and urges getting out of Vietnam now. Rusk and McNamara say U.S. policy is based on two things: (1) we will not pull out of Vietnam until the war is won; (2) we will not run a coup.

9/2/63 Cronkite interview with JFK on CBS Evening News.
 JFK: "I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the government [of South Vietnam] to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win or lose it...We are prepared to continue to assist them, but I don't think that the war can be won unless the people support the effort and, in my opinion, the government has gotten out of touch with the people...."
 Cronkite: "Do you think the government still has time to regain the support of the people?"
 JFK: "I do. With changes in policy and perhaps with personnel it can. If it doesn't make those changes, I would think that the chances of winning it would not be very good."

9/6/63 NSC Meeting. RFK raises the question whether a Communist take-over could be successfully resisted with any government. If it could not, now was the time to get out of Vietnam entirely. If it could, but not with the Diem government, we owed it to the people resisting Communism in Vietnam to give Lodge enough sanctions to bring changes that would permit successful resistance.

9/7-9/10/63 Krulak (JCS SACSA)/Mendenhall (State) trip to Vietnam.

u 9/10/63 Krulak/Mendenhall Report. Krulak: "The shooting war is going ahead at an impressive pace. It has been affected adversely by the political crisis, but the impact is not great. There is a lot of war left to fight, particularly in the Delta, where the Viet Cong remain strong.... The Viet Cong war will be won if the current U.S. military and sociological programs are pursued, irrespective of the grave defects in the ruling regime." Mendenhall forcefully disputes Krulak's view, arguing that the disaffection with the regime had reached the point where breakdown of civil government was threatened, and the possibility of a religious civil war could not be excluded. Mendenhall concludes that the war can not be won with the present regime. JFK: "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?"

9/17/63 White House Cable to Lodge: "Highest level meeting" approves program to obtain from GVN "reforms and changes in personnel necessary to maintain support of Vietnamese and U.S. opinion in war against Viet Cong.... We see no good opportunity for action to remove present government in immediate future.... We must for the present apply such pressures as are available to rescue whatever modest improvements on the scene may be possible.... Such a course...is consistent with more drastic effort as and when means become available, and we will be in touch on other channels on this problem.... There is increasing concern here with strictly military aspects of the problem [the war], both in terms of actual operations and of need to make effective case with Congress for continued prosecution of the effort. To meet these needs, President has decided to send the Secretary of Defense and General Taylor to Vietnam."

9/19/63 Cablegram from Lodge to JFK: "Agree that no good opportunity for action to remove present government in immediate future.... I see no opportunity at all for substantive changes [in Diem's political program].... General Big Minh ...expressed very privately that VC are steadily gaining in strength; have more of the population on their side than has the GVN; that arrests are continuing and that the prisons are full; that more students are going over to the Viet Cong; that there is great graft and corruption in the Vietnamese administration of our aid; and that 'the heart of the army is not in the war [emphasis in original].' All this by Vietnamese No. 1 General is now echoed by Secretary of Defense Thuan, who wants to leave the country."

9/21/63 Presidential Memorandum for the SecDef: JFK directs McNamara and Taylor to assess the political and military situation in Vietnam. Purpose: determine what GVN action required for change and what the U.S. should do to produce such action.

9/26-10/2/63 McNamara/Taylor mission to SVN. Evidence presented in numerous briefings indicate that conditions are good and will improve.

10/2/63 McNamara-Taylor Mission Report. Conclusions: "Military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress.

There are serious political tensions in Saigon (and perhaps elsewhere in SVN) where the Diem-Nhu government is becoming increasingly unpopular....There is no solid evidence of the possibility of a successful coup, although the assassination of Diem or Nhu is always a possibility. Although some, and perhaps an increasing number, of GVN military officers are becoming hostile to the government and at least for the near future they will continue to perform their military duties. Further repressive action by Diem and Nhu could change the present favorable military trends.... It is not clear that pressures exerted by the U.S. will move Diem and Nhu towards moderation." Military recommendations include "emphasis on 'clear and hold operations' instead of terrain sweeps which have little permanent value." Recommends economic and diplomatic pressure to "impress upon Diem our disapproval of his political program.... We should work with Diem but not support him.... At this time, no initiative should be taken to encourage activity in a change in government."

10/5/63 Buddhist monk commits suicide by self-immolation.

10/5/63 Cablegram from Lodge to Rusk: Minh has approached Conein and told him that key army generals viewed a coup as necessary to win the war and wanted assurances that the "USG will not rpt not attempt to thwart their plan." Conein replied "that he could not answer specific questions as to USG non-interference."

10/5/63 White House Cable to Lodge (on CIA Channel): "President today approved recommendations that no initiative should now be taken to give any active covert encouragement to a coup. There should, however, be urgent covert effort with closest security ...to build contacts with possible alternative leadership.... Essential that this effort be totally secure and fully deniable and separated from normal political analysis and reporting and other activities of country team.... All reports to Washington on this subject should be on this [CIA] channel."

10/5/63 Cablegram from Lodge to Rusk: Lodge and Harkins recommend that "Conein when next approached by Minh should: (1) Assure him that U.S. will not attempt to thwart his plans. (2) Offer to review his plans other than assassination plans. (3) Assure Minh that U.S. aid will be continued to Vietnam under Government which gives promise of gaining support of the people and winning the war against the Communists."

10/5/63 Cablegram from CIA Station Chief to McCone: "1. officially deleted. I have recommended to Ambassador Lodge that: A. We proceed with these conversations with Gen. Minh. B. 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 could rip the army and country assunder."

10/11/63 NSAM 263: Approves military recommendations contained in McNamara/Taylor report. Directs "no formal announcement be made of the implementation of plans to withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963."

10/22/63 State Department INR Memorandum RFE-90: Trends since July 1963 indicate unfavorable shift in military situation.

10/25/63 Cablegram From Bundy to Lodge. White House concerned that "an unsuccessful coup, however carefully we avoid direct engagement, will be laid at our door by public opinion almost everywhere. Therefore, while sharing your view that we should not be in a position of thwarting coup, we would like to have option of judging and warning on any plan with poor prospects of success."

10/25/63 Cablegram from Lodge to Bundy. Lodge welcomes White House instructions not to thwart a coup for two reasons: "first, it seems an even bet that the next government would not bungle or stumble as much as the present one has. Secondly...we should remember that this is the only way in which the people of Vietnam can possibly get a change of government."

10/27/63 Lodge complains to Diem of the public opinion pressures his policies (physical attacks on newsmen; Mme Nhu's inflammatory remarks in the U.S.) were placing JFK under. "When it was evident that the conversation was practically over, I [Lodge] said: 'Mr. President, every single specific suggestion which I have made, you have rejected. Isn't there some one thing you may think of that is within your capabilities to do that would favorably impress U.S. opinion?' As on other previous occasions when I asked him similar questions, he gave me a blank look and changed the subject."

10/30/63 Cablegram from Bundy to Lodge. With coup plans ready to go, the White House is nervous about possible failure. Bundy believes "our attitude to coup group can still have decisive effect on its decision.... We reiterate burden of proof must be on coup group to show a substantial possibility of quick success; otherwise, we should discourage them from proceeding since a miscalculation could result in jepordizing U.S. position in Southeast Asia."

10/30/63 Cablegram From Lodge to Rusk: "Do not think we have the power to delay or discourage a coup. Don has made it clear many times that this is a Vietnamese affair."

10/30/63 Cablegram From Bundy to Lodge: "We do not accept as a basis for U.S. policy that we have no power to delay or discourage a coup.... If you should conclude that there is not clearly a high prospect for success, you should communicate this doubt to generals in a way calculated to persuade them to desist at least until chances are better.... Once a coup under responsible leadership has begun...it is in the best interest of the U. S. government that it should succeed."

10/30/63 Message From Harkins to Taylor. Harkins complains about being cut out of cable traffic. Harkins interprets U.S. policy to mean "no initiative should now be taken to give any active encouragement to a coup.... I'm not opposed to a change in government, no indeed, but I'm inclined to feel that at this time the change be in the methods of governing rather than complete change of personnel.... Clearly there are no generals qualified to take over in my opinion.... I do not agree with the ambassador... that we are just holding our own [militarily]. The

GVN is way ahead in the I, II and parts of the III Corps and making progress in the Delta."

11/1/63 Coup d'etat by generals against Diem.

11/1/63 (4:30 p.m.) Telephone conversation between Diem and Lodge.

Diem: "Some units have made a rebellion and I want to know what is the attitude of the U.S. Government?"

Lodge: "I do not feel well enough informed to be able to tell you. I have heard the shooting, but am not acquainted with all the facts. Also it is 4:30 a.m. in Washington and the U.S. Government cannot possibly have a view."

Diem: "But you must have some general idea. After all, I am a Chief of State. I have tried to do my duty. I want to do now what duty and good sense require. I believe in duty above all."

Lodge: "You have certainly done your duty. As I said to you only this morning, I admire your courage and your great contributions to your country. No one can take away from the credit for all you have done. Now I am worried about your physical safety. I have a report that those in charge of the current activity offer you and your brother safe conduct out of the country if you resign. Had you heard this?"

Diem: "No (and then after a pause) You have my telephone number."

Lodge: "Yes. If I can do anything for your physical safety, please call me."

Diem: "I am trying to re-establish order."

11/6/63 Talking Paper for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Chiefs disagree with the conclusions of INR'S RFE-90. "This document is particularly inappropriate since it goes outside the purview of the issuing agency and directly contradicts publicly announced Defense Department estimates of purely military matters."

11/7/63 Note from McNamara to Rusk. "Dean, attached is the State memo re the war in Vietnam. Below it are the comments of the Chiefs. If you were to tell me that it is not the policy of the State Department to issue military appraisals without seeking the views of the Defense Department the matter will die."

11/8/63 Memorandum from SecState to SecDef. "...It is not the policy of the State Department to issue military appraisals without seeking the views of the Defense Department. I have requested that any memoranda given inter-departmental circulation which include military appraisals be coordinated with your department."

11/22/63 JFK assassinated.

12/21/63 Memorandum For the President From McNamara: "Current trends, unless reversed in next two to three months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely to a communist controlled state.... The new government is the greatest source of concern.... The Country Team is the second major weakness. It lacks leadership, has been poorly informed, and is not working to a common plan.... Above all, Lodge has virtually no contact with Harkins.... As to the grave reporting weakness, both Defense and CIA must take major steps to improve this.... Viet Cong progress has been great since the coup, with my best guess being

that the situation has been in fact deteriorating in the countryside since July to a far greater extent than we realized because of our undue dependence on Vietnamese reporting.... U.S. resources and personnel cannot usefully be substantially increased.... I have directed the Military Departments to review urgently the quality of people we are sending to Vietnam. It seems to have fallen off considerably from the high standards applied in the original selections in 1962, and the JCS fully agree with me that we must have our best men there."

12/21/63 Memorandum for the Record by McNamara: "It is abundantly clear that statistics received over the past year or more from the GVN officials and reported by the U.S. Mission on which we gauged the trend of the war were grossly in error.... The strategic hamlet has encountered resistance in the delta because relocation removed families from their fields and locations occupied for generations. Many defections of entire villages built along the banks of rivers and canals could not be rearranged into defendable compounds without hardships the villagers considered unacceptable."

12/23/64 McCone to McNamara: "Information furnished to us from MACV and the Embassy concerning the current Viet Cong activities in a number of provinces and the relative position of the South Vietnamese Government versus the Viet Cong forces was incorrect, due to the fact that field officers of the MAAG and USOM had been grossly misinformed by the province and district chiefs. It was reported to us, and I believe correctly, that the province and district chiefs felt obliged to 'create statistics' which would meet the approbation of the Central Government."