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MEMORANDUM

4 April 1966

SUBJECT: The Political Situation in Vietnam and Suggested Actions.

BY: Rufus Phillips

1. My interpretation of events, and from what I hear from Vietnamese friends, the Ky Government is finished. How long ~~it~~ remains standing depends on how hard we prop it up. What little moral authority it possessed has been dissipated by the way it chose to fire General Thi, who is the one Corps Commander who is regarded by the population as reasonably honest, who speaks their language and who is a revolutionary, particularly to the students.
2. Unfortunately American involvement in the firing of General Thi, regardless of the fact that it was Ky's idea to begin with, was so overt that this has generated genuine discontent. If we continue to try by any means, to keep Ky in power, we will wind up being against what we say we are for with all the consequences that entails.
3. The landing of Vietnamese Marines in Danang may precipitate a break-off of central Vietnam from the South. This would be a disastrous. My prediction is that the Marines will wind up siding with the dissidents.
4. If we are to avoid disaster we must leave ourselves the option of supporting Thi and permitting Ky to resign honorably. We can still play this card and even might convert a near disaster, into a triumph of popular support. Certainly, if Thi comes to power (with the Catholics reassured in advance) it will be with considerable popular support. This would permit the new Government to start from a stronger political base. It might even be possible to bring General Minh (the single most popular Vietnamese leader) back as Chief of State with Thi's concurrence.

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5. We have one American left in whom Thi has confidence, because that American was not involved in his dismissal. That American is General Lansdale. Lansdale also has the confidence of the Catholics and many of the Buddhists as well as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao. His relative non-involvement in direct political action during recent months can be turned into an advantage provided The U. S. is both wise and bold enough to do so.

6. My suggestion is that Ambassador Lodge and General Lansdale be immediately authorized to initiate contacts with General Thi and his supporters to explore the possibility of an orderly change of power with Ky and Thi coming to terms. This could be handled in such a way that U. S. Political embarrassment could be minimized by having Thi endorse the aims of the Honolulu Conference, etc. To fail to initiate action such as this now may leave us with absolutely no options if Ky fails to establish his authority. And I repeat that my estimate is that he will fail.

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