AN NBC NEWS WHITE PAPER

VIETNAM HINDSIGHT

PART II: THE DEATH OF DIEM

BROADCAST: WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1971
10:00 - 11:00
Cameramen
STEVE PETROPOULOS
WILLIAM RICHARDS

Sound
JAMES ZOLTOWSKI
JOSE VALLE
JOHN SINGLETON
JEROME GOLD
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IRVING GANS
SHELLY PIELMAN

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PEOPLE WHO WERE INTERVIEWED FOR VIETNAM HINDSIGHT IN ORDER OF THEIR APPEARANCE AND POSITION HELD AT THE TIME

GEORGE BALL
Under-Secretary of State
1961-1966

MAXWELL TAYLOR
Military Adviser to JFK - 1961
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs
1962-64

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH
Ambassador to India
1961-63

DAVID HALBERSTAM
Correspondent - New York Times - Vietnam
1962-63

WALT M. ROSTOW
Deputy Special Assistant to the President for National Security
1961-64

MME. NHU
Wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu, sister-in-law of Ngo Dinh Diem

ARTHUR SCHLESINGER
Special Assistant to the President
1961-64

PAUL HARKINS
US Military Commander - Vietnam
1962-64

JOHN VANN
American Military Adviser in Vietnam

MICHAEL FORRESTAL
Senior Member - White House National Security Staff
1962-66

ROGER HILSMAN
Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs
1963-64

RUFUS PHILLIPS
American AID Mission - Vietnam
FREDERICK NOLTING
U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam
1961-63

LT. COL. LUCIEN CONEIN
CIA - Vietnam
1961-64

DEAN RUSK
Secretary of State
1961-69

GENERAL TON THAT DINH
Military Governor - Saigon
1963

GENERAL DO MAU
Director - Military Security
1963

MA TUYEN
Leader - Saigon Chinese Community

COL. DUONG NGOC LAM
Director - Civilian Guard
1963

GENERAL NGUYEN KHANH
Commander - Second Corps - ARVN
1963
It was either a question of pulling out of Vietnam at that time and... and or having the Diem regime shape up or facing the possibility of some other regime coming in.

My instructions with my meeting with Gen. Duong Van Minh in October of 1963 from Ambassador Lodge were that I was to inform Gen. Minh that the United States government would not thwart their coup.

This is the second of two programs examining how in the years of John F. Kennedy's presidency we slipped deeper into a war in Asia against Asians. A war that our most respected military commanders had always warned us against. By the summer of 1963 we had
committed ourselves more deeply than Kennedy had intended to winning the war in Vietnam.

**KALBER (SOF)**

We did not ask what kind of a government we were supporting, we did not ask whether we should be there. We were there and we assumed that it was right that we should be there. The question was what would we do, how far would we go to win the war.

**KALBER (VO)**

In the summer of 1963 the focus of our attention was the faltering government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was losing the war, what were we going to do about it?

**CONEIN (SOF)**

Now General Don promised me that he would turn over the plans for the coup. That I could give this personally to Lodge. I so informed Lodge that this was the agreement.
Between June and October 1963, seven Buddhists monks burned themselves to death as a protest against the government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem has lost the support of his people. To continue to hold power he has to use more and more force.

In August 1963 there are more than 12,000 Americans in Vietnam. The war costs us a half a billion dollars a year and we are losing it.

The President of the United States sees his range of choices being narrowed...

I think he had developed a sense of about to get into a trap.

I think the President was worried that events were moving in a direction which might be very hard to reverse or even become irreversible.

The issue has bitterly divided his advisers.
Some say we have to support Diem and concentrate on the war in the field. Others argue that we can't support a corrupt oppressive government. They say Diem can't win the war.

A hint of how the debate inside the administration is going is the replacement of Frederick Nolting as Ambassador to Saigon. Nolting has insisted Diem can win the war and do it without American troops. The man chosen to replace Nolting is Henry Cabot Lodge. Kennedy has decided that he wants a man in Saigon with "force of personality" that will allow him to "dominate the situation."

Well I would tell anybody that America is committed to respect people's religious convictions and religious
tolerance and that's what I would say to anybody who asked me a question about America.

CORRESPONDENT (VO)
Does that mean you'll be arriving on the scene with sympathy for the Buddhist cause?

LODGE (SOF)
It means I'll be arriving on the scene as an American who believes in religious tolerance.

CORRESPONDENT (VO)
Do you think there will be or should be any change in our policies toward the Vietnam government when you arrive there?

LODGE (SOF)
I think the policy of the United States ought to be to help the republic of Vietnam to win and maintain its freedom from communist terrorism. And that any event or any action which is, which promotes that objective we are for
LODGE (VO)
and anything which hinders that objective we are against.

KALBER (VO)
Diem's brother Nhu says, "The Americans are sending us a pro-Consul."

MONTAGE OF TROOPS IN TRUCKS
As Lodge flies to Vietnam, Diem suddenly declares martial law. Special forces troops, whose wages are paid by the United States Central Intelligence Agency, disguised in Vietnam army uniforms,

MONTAGE OF BUDDHISTS ARRESTS
begins to carry out raids on Buddhist pagodas all over the country. In two hours 1400 people are arrested.

LS DIEM WITH TROOPS

CONEIN (VO)
This man at this point, in my estimation figured that he no longer needed the Americans. He had to find another solution for himself, for his country.

MCU OF VN SOLDIER

DIEM DEPARTS IN CAR

PULL BACK FROM CU

Ngo Dinh Diem has always wanted one thing. He wanted above all reunification and a free Vietnam.
Lt. Col. Lucien Conein is the key CIA agent in Vietnam. Later he is secretly awarded this medal by CIA Director John McCone. He has known Diem since World War II. He knows what Diem is thinking now. He had to make a deal with the people of the north. His brother Ngo Dinh Nhu in early 1963 told me personally that he was dealing, not only me, he told other people, but he told me personally that he was dealing with the people of North Vietnam. If he had told this to me, the Generals knew of this also and they considered this as a danger because what in the devil were they fighting for if the Central government was negotiating behind their backs. Lodge hears from Conein the Generals
are planning a coup.

They want to know what the United States' attitude would be.

Lodge cables Washington.

It is Saturday when Lodge's cable reaches Washington.

The president is weekending at Hyannisport. Rusk is in New York. McNamara is on his vacation, McCone is on his honeymoon.

At George Ball's house, while he gets ready to play tennis, the issue is discussed and a cable drafted.

This cable will be signed by Ball.

It is supported by the liberals—Harriman, Hilsman—who are embarrassed by Diem's repressive policies and who feel Diem is preventing us from winning the war.

BALL (SOF)

I thought that the string had pretty well run out and if we were going to continue to support any regime, either Diem had to reform his government and take control or some new government had to come in.
It authorized Lodge to tell the
Generals that they could count on
American support...

if they took action against Diem
so this in effect was an open
invitation to plot and execute a
coup against the Diem government with
the assurance that the Americans
would back up the plotters.

I called President Kennedy who was in
Hyannisport and gave him the contents
of the cable and I telephoned Secretary
Rusk who was in New York and did the
same thing. We decided to go ahead
with the cable.

I was at my home in Maryland and late
that night I got a call from Forrestal.

I was told that the President had
already cleared it over the phone with George Ball and that Dean Rusk had been informed and I regarded, therefore, the question of the contents of that cable as a political decision which the State department had the primary responsibility. So even though I was somewhat unhappy about the thrust of the cable I did clear it for the Defense Department.

TAYLOR (VO)
The first that I knew of this cable was a telephone call from Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric.

TAYLOR(SOF)
I was very much disturbed by what the cable contained and requested a copy of it from the Pentagon. I received one later in the evening, I would say about ten or eleven o'clock that night...the first time I saw the cable. This of course was a most unusual procedure because it meant that a cable which...the content of which had enormous impact upon our
policy in South Vietnam, not only that year but even in the present time ... was being sent out without the concurrence of the Secretary of Defense or the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

KALBER (VO)
On Monday, Kennedy, Rusk, McNamara and McCone are back in Washington. They have second thoughts about the cable.

SCHLESINGER (SOF)
President Kennedy was unhappy about the August 24th cable. It would be putting it too strongly to say that he thought something had been put over on him, but he thought something had gone out as a governmental judgment, governmental decision which had not been fully and adequately discussed.

RUSK (SOF)
When the three of us got back to town we had a chance to look at the text of the cable. I had the impression that the cable went somewhat further than we really wanted to go and we
took some steps then to sort...pull back on that cable a bit.

HILSMAN (SOP)
McNamara and McCone had returned and because they had not personally approved of it were in a position where they could raise objections and raise doubts which they did. This made Kennedy very angry.

HILSMAN (VO)
So there was a meeting that Monday. It was again thoroughly discussed and Kennedy ended up by saying, the cable has just arrived in Saigon on Sunday, no action has been taken, it is not too late to renege, call it back. And he went around the table and asked each one of them, do you want to withdraw the cable?

And nobody said he did, so the cable stood.
Lodge cables Kennedy, "we are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back."

There were ways as there always is in Washington, slogans, for describing these things, one of them that was current at the time was "that we should think of ourselves as a good doctor with a sick and dying patient." That the United States had tried everything to think of but had found that the patient was simply not savable.

The coup is scheduled for August 26th. August 26th passes, nothing happens. Washington waits.

Now we didn't know whether there was going to be a coup. Some of us...some people thought there would never be a coup.
HILSMAN (SOF)

So word didn't really come that it was off. What happened was that over the next week or 10 days it became increasingly clear that the Generals were not going to act. Then the issue became what will the United States do, will the United States Diem...if Diem does not change his policy will we go on supporting him in the repression of the Buddhists. Will we go on supporting him in a policy of repressing half of his country which is bound to lose the war and drag us down with him in the ignominy of attacking the Buddhists? What do we do? That became our issue.

KALBER (VO)

Now for the President there is no easy choice. Diem is the only strong leader in South Vietnam but he is losing the war.

The alternatives are down to two. Persuade him to change or agree to the coup.
Now in September 1963 Vietnam is on the President's mind.

He spent I think, probably between 15 and maybe 20 percent of his time everyday on the subject. I think it was for him, the beginning of a process of learning so much about it THAT he was beginning to get concerned about some of the major premises in which we were operating.

Once he asked whether I thought we hadn't perhaps over-estimated our own human resources, our own army, our own AID agency, our own economic people. Over-estimated their abilities to be helpful 12,000 miles away in a foreign country. And under-estimated, or I should say also, over-estimated the capacity of the Vietnamese government to absorb this kind
of help and to use it.

KALBER (VO)

His problem is who can he ask? The reports from the commanding general and the CIA in Saigon are still optimistic. The charts and statistics still show we are winning the war. Some of his closest advisers agree.

In Vietnam the Buddhists have now been joined by the students. On September 7, 800 students are arrested in Saigon. The country has turned against Diem.

The President expresses his concern publicly on September 9, when he is interviewed by Chet Huntley and David Brinkley.

KENNEDY (SOF)

We don't want to have a repetition of China because that was our most, the most damaging event, certainly that has occurred to us perhaps in this century. When that passed into the control of the
Communists

KENNEDY (VO)
What has occurred to us...

KENNEDY (SOF)
is the past two months do not give us
as great an assurance for success in
the struggle as was true up to May and
June. Now we are attempting to use our
influence to bring the situation back
to what it was.

Privately, Kennedy's advisers are
deeply split over how to get the
situation "back to what it was" Finally,
the still unspoken question is asked.

Can we go on in Vietnam with or without
Diem?

The person who really raised it and
made it very blunt and clear was Robert
Kennedy. .

He said, well I think, personally, that
can't go on helping Diem if he refuses
to change his policies

and that the time has therefore come
when we the United States must consider
going out totally. Leaving, departing.
No more aid, no more anything.

HILSMAN (VO)
The second thing was that in this very
dramatic meeting in the State Department.

HILSMAN (SOF)
there was an NSC meeting without the
President and there was some very tense
arguments between the Secretary of Defens
on the one hand, and myself and Averell
Harriman on the other, Paul Kattenburg
was there as my aide. And when a total
impasse was reached, Paul Kattenburg
had the courage to voice the ultimate
implication of what Harriman, I and he,
Kattenburg had been saying, that we
couldn't go on with Diem and that if we
couldn't work out some way of putting
pressure on Diem, even at the risk of a
coup, then the United States should
get out of Vietnam.
McNamara suggests one more fact finding mission to Vietnam.
Roger Hilsman protests. He asks, "What good can another fact finding mission possibly do"?

I was so upset that I did something that's really unforgiveable. I followed the President of the United States into the Oval Office espostulating against this, or at least, repeating it and President Kennedy sort of in the manner of talking to a child who is misbehaving, said with some irritation in his voice, "I know all this Roger," but in words of one syllable he sounded like, he said, "I know all this but we've got to keep the JCS on board." By that he meant not going along with us and not leaking to the press and doing all sorts of things. And the only way we can keep
the JCS on board is to keep McNamara on board. And apparently the only way he can keep McNamara on board is to let him go and see for himself. And he said, "I know this is costing us, I know it's gonna cost us, but that's the price we have to pay" To keep the government together, you see.

MS OF PRESS CONFERENCE

CORRESPONDENT (VO)

As a result of your visit to Vietnam will there be an increase in American manpower or American equipment.

MCNAMARA (SOP)

I'm inclined to think, certainly not as a result of the visit, but I'm inclined to think...we will of course, continue to supply the assistance, both logistical and training assistance that is requested of us by the South Vietnamese. There will be a continued flow of support to the country, but I doubt that it will be necessary to increase the manpower in any substantial degree above present levels.
That level is now over 16,000 Americans in Vietnam. And in the upper echelons of the State Department and the military in Saigon there is a deep division. Lodge and Harkins barely talk to each other.

He liked to settle things and do things on his own without too much consultation with his own staff or with those others in the country. This came to me and most apparently to me when Secretary McNamara and General Taylor visited in late September, early October of 1963 and they asked me if I'd seen two or three or four cables that came through the State Department involving some of the military operations. I said I hadn't. Well they hadn't been shown to me by the Ambassador.

There is a meeting with Diem. McNamara
and Taylor know, and Diem must know it is a final pulse taking.

TAYLOR (VO)
We had the feeling that based upon Diem's record up 'til '63 which was quite good...

TAYLOR (SOF)
that we could succeed with Diem, or Diem would succeed with our assistance if he would do certain things. If he would make a real effort to conciliate the political elements which were challenging him in the streets, and make some effort to bring outsiders into government so that as the phrase was, he would broaden the base of his cabinet. So we had no fear at all that this was... the situation was disastrous or impossible if these things happened.

TAYLOR (VO)
There was a real question whether Diem would make the adaptation required, but nonetheless it was the best solution for the moment, I thought to let him try.

KALBER (VO)
The President has still not made up his mind. He still considers his options.
In the session which McNamara and I had with the President early in October, 1963, there may have been others present, but he specifically authorized and directed us to come up with a plan which would call for a total withdrawal of U.S. forces by the end of 1965.

But pressures are building that cannot be held back. Kennedy has no more options. He can no longer support Diem. He can't simply pull out. Reluctantly he decides to suspend our aid to Vietnam.

It was not a decision anybody looked forward to with any great pleasure, but the President felt that Diem at that time was demeaning the United States by permitting actions to be taken in the name of his government that were so distasteful.

Were there those in the administration opposed to that?
I don't recall that there was any very heated debate on the subject. It seemed to me at the time that there was rather widespread agreement that the Diem regime had to reform if we were going to continue to give it our support.

What do you consider that decision meant for the Diem regime in terms of our association with them?

Well, I think what the decision meant in Vietnam was a signal to the forces that were not necessarily opposed to the regime but to Diem, but felt that Diem was not providing the necessary leadership. It was an encouragement, obviously for them to go ahead and try to organize another government. This was inevitable, it seems to me, when the American government made a decision to cut off aid.

Now in October, 1963, Kennedy has committed the United States by withdrawing support
DISSOLVE TO MLS JFK AT DESK

from Diem, to change in the government of Vietnam, to our acquiescence in the overthrow of Diem.
A morning of October 2, 1963.

A street in Saigon.

General Tran Van Don, Acting Chief of the Joint General Staff "accidentally" meets Colonel Conein of the CIA. General Don says the coup is on again.

I was told that I was not to encourage, nor was I to discourage a coup, by my Ambassador. Those were the exact words that I was told.

At no time, was I to tell them you are to have a coup or you are not to have a coup.

General Don says General Big Minh is the leader of the coup. He wants to see Conein.

My instructions were that I was to inform General Minh that the United...
States government would not thwart their coup. And I conveyed this.

**CONEIN (VO)**

You could liken it to a football team. Ambassador Lodge was the quarterback, the coaching was being conducted by Washington, D.C. and I was the eyes and ears and the mouthpiece of Henry Cabot Lodge to the junta.

**CONEIN (SOP)**

It was quite obvious that if at one point that this American hand had shown that the whole thing would blow up and therefore it would be an extreme embarrassment. Therefore, Ambassador Lodge made it very clear to me that if something went wrong that he would have to be able to have deniability that I even existed.

**KALBER (VO)**

Most Americans in Vietnam see no sign of what is about to happen. American advisers working with the army of South Vietnam do not hear
about the coup. United States headquarters does not believe there will be a coup.

HARKINS (VO)
I thought the thing was dead as far as an overthrow of Diem was concerned and I went on with my business of fighting the war and training the military.

And unbeknownst to me, although I was the senior military man there, the CIA was working with the Ambassador and contacting the Generals.

HARKINS (SOF)
I didn't know this, I was not informed of this until I read it in the Pentagon Papers in 1971.

CONEIN (SOF)
I, by accident had been there for many years and I had gotten to know these individuals, so consequently when they had something very important to talk about they would not talk to their military advisers, which upset the whole military chain of command. Because poor General Harkins, it was
not his fault. What would happen is he would say, "I have received this bit of information, what does this mean?" So he'd go up and his senior adviser would go up and he would talk to, for example, to General Don and say, "What's this I hear you people are planning a coup?" "Coup?" would say General Don, "We don't know what you're talking about."

KALBER (VO)

VIETNAMESE RIOT FORCE

By now Diem and Nhu have heard about the coup. Diem begins to plan to use it for his own purposes.

CONEIN (VO)

Well, he had Bravo One which was a phoney coup and he had Bravo Two, which was to bring him back into power. And they would be brought back by popular acclaim by his military and be re-established and therefore he would go into the program that he had originally planned, which was to negotiate with the North and insist that the Ameriqans get out.
KALBER (VO)

To carry out his plan Diem now calls on General Ton That Dinh.

JACK PERKINS (VO)

So the palace wanted to stop the coup that they heard was building and they turned to you?

DINH (SOF)

To me, yes. Yes, sir.

JACK PERKINS (VO)

Nhu called you in? Mr. Nhu...

DINH (SOF)

No, it was President Diem himself.

PERKINS (VO)

President Diem himself called you in?

DINH (SOF)

...called me on the phone immediately.

JACK PERKINS (VO)

And then the palace decided to give you control of troops to try to build up a counter coup?

DINH (SOF)

Yes, yes sir.
JACK PERKINS (VO)  
To make a counter coup?

DINH (SOF)  
After that...I have told you...
President Diem when he has ordered to me to investigate...he ordered me to see Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu. So Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu give me his own troops from palace and defense of palace, everything.

JACK PERKINS (VO)  
Nhu gave you control of all these in order to stop the coup?

DINH (SOF)  
Yes, to stop it.

JACK PERKINS  
And you used them, eventually, to make the coup?

DINH (SOF)  
Yes, yes sir. (Laughing) I think it's the best way to do.

KALBER (VO)  
From the American Embassy Lodge sends a final cable to the President. "We no longer have the power to delay the coup." Kennedy cables Lodge: It is in the interest
of the United States government that the coup shall succeed.

KALBER (VO)
November 1, Saigon. There are now 16,732 Americans in Vietnam. We are spending half-a-billion dollars a year to support the war against the Viet Cong. They now control 80% of the countryside.

At 1:20 p.m. the coup begins. From insurgent headquarters, Colonel Conein reports to Lodge.

CONEIN (SOF)
I had a radio, a special radio that cut me into a special net... directly to the Embassy, plus I had with the junta or the plotters agreement that I had a special telephone line directly to the U.S. Embassy.

AL DAVIS (VO)
General Taylor and others told us that they were not precisely aware
of the moment of the coup. Do you think that's possible?

CONENIN (VO)
My personal opinion is this is quite inconceivable because during the whole reporting period.

CONENIN (SOF)
through my own channels, I was reporting by cable every one of the developments leading up to and including the timing of the coup.

CONENIN (VO)
Every one of the meetings, every one of negotiations, the discussions that were held with General Big Minh, with General Don, with General Kim and any other military leader who were participating in the coup was completely reported to Washington, D.C. and I received many times guidance exactly of what I was to discuss with these individuals and the limits of which I could discuss these problems with them.
ALVIN DAVIS (VO)

Did you ever give any advice to Don or Big Minh or any of the generals about deployment of troops, surrounding the palace closing the doors?

CONEIN (SOF)

Do you want the truth?

ALVIN DAVIS (VO)

Yes, I want the truth.

CONEIN (SOF)

Now, the only thing that I ever gave to and advise was, that at one time when they came to me and said they are bogged down. The reason being bogged down was that one unit that was supposed to be in place was being delayed, and off the top of my head...with no instructions and no instructions from my government, I said "Once you are into the attack you must continue. If you hesitate you're going to be lost."
The government of South Vietnam has been overthrown following a fourteen-hour battle in Saigon between a large force of military rebels and special troops guarding the Presidential palace.

A late report says President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu surrendered following a final ninety-minute fire fight around the palace. The two are said to have been found in a basement bunker in the palace and placed under arrest.

This report is untrue. Diem and Nhu have escaped from the palace. They are hiding in the Chinese quarter.

Early the next morning Diem talks to the Junta.

He asks for safe conduct into exile.
The insurgents went in to look for Diem and bring him back. And they had arranged and I can swear to this because I'm the one who personally said this, I asked the Embassy for an aircraft and I was told I had to wait 24 hours before I could get the aircraft that was necessary to transport Diem to a nation who would accept his exile. I spoke for the United States government and I was authorized and I informed the junta that I had an aircraft, but it would take me 24 hours to have that aircraft.

ALVIN DAVIS (VO)

Instead?

CONEIN (SOF)

Instead he was shot by a Major.

CONEIN (VO)

in the Vietnamese army.

TAYLOR (VO)

A message was passed into the President which contained simply
the news that both Diem and his brother Nhu had been killed. And the explanation being provided by the leaders of the coup was that the two brothers had committed suicide.

TAYLOR (SOF)
President Kennedy upon reading that jumped to his feet, his face turned pale, he seemed to have difficulty in controlling himself and rushed out of the room.

FORRESTAL (VO)
It shook him personally...bothered him as a moral and religious matter. It shook his confidence, I think, in the kind of advice he was getting about South Vietnam and it troubled him really deeply.
President Ngo Dinh Diem died
because he resisted the domination of
foreigners. Resisted the scheme for a
mass landing of foreign troops in
Vietnam. Resisted the attempt to widen
a war which will destroy both parts of
Vietnam. In a word, President Ngo died
for the people of Vietnam.

KALBER (VO)

Eight years after his death, November,
1971 the rehabilitation of Ngo Dinh Diem
had begun in Vietnam.

How he died,
who ordered his death, has been a
mystery for eight years.

On November 1, 1971, the members of the
junta
who plotted the overthrow of Diem met
at a garden party to commemorate his death.

KALBER (VO)
They were the same men who had argued eight years before over whether they ought to kill Diem. That argument went on over several meetings, kept secret until now.

COL. NGHIA (SOF)
Translation
I can confirm one thing for you and that is the fate of President Diem was decided by the majority of the members of the revolutionary committee on the night of the first...second of November, 1963. It was decided by a majority of that committee, that's all.

XCU COL. NGHIA
The majority against.

ALVIN DAVIS (VO)
Against what?

COL. NGHIA (SOF)
Translation
Mr. Nhu and Mr. Diem.

ALVIN DAVIS (VO)
Against their being in power or against their lives?
CU COL. NGHIA

Both.

CU GEN. DO MAU/STILL

We were very tired.

ZOOM IN TO XCU/STILL

We had fallen asleep in Khiem's office.

MCU DO MAU

When we woke up we discovered that the office was empty. Khiem ordered me to go out and find where the other Generals were. I finally found them in General Big Minh's office. Now it seems it was General Little Minh who said to me they were there in order to discuss the fate of President Diem. That they had decided to kill him. I was so furious that my face was red when I came back at them. Why have you decided to kill President Diem when, before the coup, General Don and I decided, we all agreed, to send President Diem to Dalat with a military escort. General Big Minh simply shrugged his shoulders while General Oai came back at me with this. "My friend you must not listen
CUT TO SLOW ZOOM IN TO
CU DIEM'S PALACE/STILL

listen to Colonel Do Mau. To kill weeds
you must pull them up by the roots". I
was furious. I said, Well now the
responsibility is yours" and I left the
room and went back to my place.

KALBER (VO)
When the coup began, Diem and Nhu were
in the palace. The plan was to capture
them there.

The palace was to be surrounded by
troops of the junta.

This did not happen.

ALVIN DAVIS (VO)
You were with the Generals. Weren't you
all in on how to prevent Diem from
getting out of there?

LUCIEN CONEIN (SOF)
Well, I can say this one thing that the
unit that was supposed to be there to
take care of that facet was the one that
was delayed.

Diem and Nhu got out of the palace
during the height of the attack
by going very simply through a tunnel and they got into an automobile and just drove on out and went into Cholon.

KALBER (VO)
The leader of the local Chinese community is Ma Tuyen.

MA TUYEN (SOF)
Translation
President Diem came to my home at 2100 hours on November 1, 1963.

When I saw the President arrive I came out to meet him and invited him into my house. I did not talk to him.

I only invited him into my house to rest and offered him tea. That's all.

MA TUYEN (VO)
Translation
The President told me that he was going to Thanh Tan Church.
Children recognized them, reported to the military that Diem was there and this was the first indication that we knew Diem was not in the palace.

It is then that the generals who in 1971 will meet to mourn Diem, meet in secret to argue again, what to do with him.

General Lam is put in command of the convoy that is sent to bring Diem and Nhu back to the headquarters of the junta.

At first I wanted to put them in a jeep, but when I realized for their security I was not well advised to put them in a jeep, since it would be too vulnerable. I found an armored car which provided more security for the President and his brother.
ALVIN DAVIS (VO)

How did it happen that you didn't put a bodyguard along with the two brothers?

GEN. LAM (SOF)
Translation

I didn't want to because I thought they were amply secure in the armored car.

ALVIN DAVIS (VO)

Was there a time which you considered especially dangerous during the trip back?

GEN. LAM (SOF)
Translation

No, except at one point...we came to a crossing where we were stopped by a train.

ALVIN DAVIS (VO)

For how many minutes?

GEN LAM (SOF)
Translation

About five minutes. And that was when they were killed.
In the armored car?

Yes, that's what I thought later.

I slept until Noon. I went back to General Headquarters and to the right of the building I saw the armored car open. When I reached the car I saw Colonel Thieu there as well. He's now President of the Republic of Vietnam. Then I saw two bodies, the body of President Diem and the body of his brother Nhu.

Did you look into the car?

No, I kept on going. I continued in my jeep to GHQ. When I arrived at GHQ I was told that they had been assassinated.
Well then, who killed the two brothers?

Three months later I was told that it was Captain Nhung who had killed the President.

What were his duties in the Vietnamese army?

He was General Minh's aide-de-camp and bodyguard.

General Nguyen Khanh headed a coup that ousted Big Minh early in 1964.

He himself was ousted a short time later. Now he runs a restaurant in Paris.
We met at Dalat after I took control on January 30, 1964, to discover the truth about the death of Diem. It is known who killed Diem.

But I gave my word as a General that I would not divulge the secret.

But the first thing you did when you became President was arrest a Major named Nhung, formerly Captain. Is that correct?

I arrested him for his own security because I knew that pro-Diem elements would revenge themselves against him. And also, I arrested him because he was a very important witness for me.
Unfortunately, two days later, this man was found hanging in his cell by the strings of his parachute. At least, that is the official version of the report I received 24 hours later. The loss of this man meant that I had no witness to verify who gave the order to kill President Diem and his brother.

DAVIS (VO)

But this Major was the assassin, wasn't he?

GEN. KHANH (SOF)
Translation

Major Nhung was 100% the assassin of President Diem and of his brother Nhu.

DAVIS (VO)

What is General Big Minh's position on the decision to kill Diem?
I would rather you ask the question directly to Minh himself as directly and frankly as you have done to me, and I hope Minh will have the courage to answer frankly about what happened.

General Minh did not choose to answer. He refused to see NBC News Associate Producer, Alvin Davis. Nevertheless, what happened, and his part in what happened, is now clear.

The killing of Diem was ordered at a final meeting of the junta in the early morning hours of November 2, 1963.

Associate Producer, Alvin Davis spent 6 weeks talking on and off the record with the principals at that meeting.
When the coup began, the decision to kill Diem had not yet been made. Even afterwards, General Big Minh had assured at least three members of the Junta to whom I spoke that Diem's life would be spared.

The decision to kill Diem apparently developed over a series of eight meetings and arguments and, finally, a vote. Seventeen generals and colonels took part.

Three who would have voted to save Diem were assassinated before the vote was taken.

Four others, including the President Prime Minister Khiem, were expressly left out of it.

The decision began to go against Diem when it was learned that he and his brother had escaped from the palace. But there were many
among the 17 who had wanted him killed from the start. There were, for an example, the words uttered by Big Minh and overheard in the only phrase spoken in French rather than Vietnamese: "THE PIG MUST BE KILLED!"

Here is the sequence as well as it can be reconstructed. Diem had his nephew call the General Staff at 4:00 a.m. on November 2 and talk to General Don. He refused to speak to Big Minh. The nephew asked for full honors, together with a graceful exit from power and safe conduct to sanctuary in another country. General Don was polite and correct, but turned him down. But Big Minh was furious over the slight to him, the leader. Between 6:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. on November 2 there were three key phone calls from Diem himself. On the first, Diem again refused to speak to Big Minh. On the
second, he finally spoke to Minh, again asking for full honors. Minh, now angrier than ever, hung up on him. On the third, Diem gave in, asking only for safe conduct. The armored column was immediately dispatched to pick up him and his brother in front of the Church at Cholon. Just before the column left, the vote began.

DAVIS (VO)

CU GEN. MINH/STILL

Big Minh: kill.

CUT TO CU GEN. DON/STILL

General Don: kill.

CUT TO CU GEN. KIM

General Le Van Kim: kill.

CUT TO CU GEN. XUAN

General Xuan: kill

CUT TO MCU COL. NGHIA

Colonel Nghia: kill

DAVIS (SOF)

And so it went.

MS ALVIN DAVIS

Colonel Nghia is right. At the end there was total unity and a vow of silence -- which has now, to me, been broken.
The signal to kill was given by Big Minh to his bodyguard, Captain Nhung, a professional assassin with 48 notches in his revolver.

Colonel Lam was in military control of the column, in constant radio contact with Big Minh. On its way back, as Lam has said, the column reached a grade crossing and stopped for five minutes to let a train go by.

Lam told Minh by radio where they were. Minh's last signal was, "Maintenance," -- "Now!" Lam drove up along the left side of the armored car and Captain Nhung, in a jeep with Colonel Nghia, drove up along the right side.

Lam signaled the "Now!" to Nhung, Nhung opened the door of the armored car and shot the two brothers as they sat with hands tied behind their backs.
Then the train passed and the column continued on to GHQ. Lam, who, as you saw, denied to me that he knew the brothers were dead, went inside and reported to Big Minh: "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED"

I showed this summary to Colonel Conein.

CONEIN (SOF)
I happen to know that there was a blood oath taken. And this blood oath is still binding.

DAVIS (VO)
Now I'm not asking you to divulge any oath or any secret, that's part of our agreement.
I'm just informing you of this and asking you if you have any comment on it?

CONEIN (SOF)
No. I have no comment on this because I consider that...what I know to be privileged information.
and though you know it, be my guest and tell everybody.

DAVIS (VO)

When you say I know it, you mean as far as you're concerned what I have told you fits what you know.

CONEIN (SOF)

In all probabilities, yes.

DAVIS (VO)

Well, I'm asking you for... don't hedge on it, please. I'm not asking you to say anything other than what you just said in another form. You know it...

CONEIN (SOF)

Yes, You

found it out, you know it...

DAVIS (VO)

And you said it is correct?

CONEIN (SOF)

It's correct.
Thus 10,000 miles away from Washington a man dies violently.

A war in Asia becomes our war. For the first time we begin to look at what we have gotten ourselves into.

And John F. Kennedy, sitting with a trusted adviser has some troubled thoughts.

I saw him the last time on Thursday, I think the 21st of November. He'd asked me to go out to Cambodia, first Saigon then to Pnom Penh.

He did what he sometimes did at the end of the day or when he was a little tired. He asked me to stay a bit and
he said, when you come back I want you to come and see me because we have to start to plan

for what we are going to do now

He said I want to start a complete and very profound review of how we got into this country,

what we thought we were doing and what we now think we can do. He said I even want to think about whether or not we should be there.

He said, because this was of course in the context of an election campaign, that he didn't think that we could consider drastic changes of policy quickly. But that what he wanted to consider when I returned and when people were ready to think about this
more clearly was how could some kind of a gradual shift in our presence in South Vietnam occur. I think he probably said that to some other people as well. But I have a very clear recollection of it and of course, the following morning when I arrived in Saigon, actually it was night out there at 2:00 o'clock in the morning he was killed.

One legacy he leaves is Vietnam. It is useless to speculate what he would have done if he had lived, or Diem had lived. But we know that the death of these 2 men climaxed a growing crisis that was a turning point in our involvement in Vietnam.

After that we had fewer options, the choices were harder.
President Kennedy opposed French colonial rule in Indochina. He sympathized with the aspirations of the poor and the backward. But he also believed that the United States must confront and contain communism in Southeast Asia.

He and his advisers accepted, without re-examination the slogans of 20 years of American foreign policy. They were against appeasement. They did not want to be soft on communism. They said "no more Munichs" as we now say "no more Vietnams". Perhaps the real lesson to be learned is "no more easy slogans."

The Taylor mission in 1961 led the Kennedy administration into a series of decisions that involved the United States more and more deeply in a war we could not win.
we tried to prop up an inefficient and corrupt government and un unwilling army with our money and our military technology.

When that failed we tried to force that government to reform itself and the result was a coup and 2 murders that deepened and complicated our moral and military involvement. It is true that in November of 1963 there was still only 16,000 Americans in Vietnam. A face saving withdrawal, a neutralized Vietnam would have been costly but it might not have been impossible. Certainly the death of Diem and of Kennedy narrowed the options open to Lyndon Johnson. They did not foreclose a decision on his part to lessen our military commitment, but they did make it more difficult.

KALBER (SOF)

We have assembled in these programs as much of the record as we could and it shows that
for our deepened involvement in Vietnam, Kennedy and his advisers must bear responsibility. This is not to deny that they were good and patriotic men, intelligent and dedicated. But like characters in a Greek tragedy they were victims of Hubris, their pride, their arrogance in believing they could manage the crisis of the world with American know-how.

They failed to perceive the limits of their own power to change the world. In the end, John F. Kennedy, sceptical, sophisticated, aware of all of the pitfalls of involvement in a war in Asia against Asians became the architect of that involvement.

MS ETERNAL FLAME
MONTAGE GIs LEAVING VIETNAM

(MUSIC UP)
NOW I'VE BEEN HAPPY LATELY
MONTAGE GIS ARRIVING IN US THINKING ABOUT THE GOOD THINGS TO COME AND I BELIEVE IT COULD BE SOMETHING GOOD HAS BEGUN

MONTAGE GIS GREETING FAMILIES OH I'VE BEEN SMILING LATELY DREAMING ABOUT THE WORLD AT ONE? AND I BELIEVE IT COULD BE THAT SOME DAY IS GOING TO COME WHEN UP ON THE EDGE OF DAWN THERE RIDES THE PEACE TRAIN OH PEACE TRAIN TAKE THIS COUNTRY COME TAKE ME HOME AGAIN NOW I'VE BEEN SMILING LATELY....