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Kennedy Role in Diem Death Chronicled

WASHINGTON — The John F. Kennedy administration was complicit in the 1963 assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Diem, according to newly-published cables and firsthand testimony.

The grim chronicle has been exhumed in "President Kennedy," a new, unvarnished assessment of the New Frontier by noted author Richard Reeves. It documents that President Kennedy's foreign policy team, beginning with Saigon envoy Henry Cabot Lodge, knew well beforehand that Vietnamese generals were planning to kill Diem and his brothers; they did nothing to thwart the plot, indeed they promised U.S. military and economic aid to the plotters should they succeed.

Here is the sequence of cable traffic between Saigon and Washington in the weeks before the Nov. 1 coup and assassination:

Aug. 15: Disgusted by South Vietnam's repression of its Buddhist majority, Kennedy sends off Henry Cabot Lodge, the man he beat for the U.S. Senate a decade earlier, to be his all-powerful man in Saigon.

Aug. 24: Angered by a government-led raid on Buddhist pagodas, believed led by President Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, Kennedy cables Lodge: "Diem must be given chance to rid himself of Nhu. If Diem remains obdurate and refuses, then we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved."

Lodge cables Washington his proposal that the U.S. stop trying to warn President Diem, but instead "go straight to the generals" and tell them "it's up to them whether to keep him (Diem)."

Aug. 25: Washington gives Lodge go-ahead as well as authority to "decide best means of getting word to generals."

Aug. 29: Lodge to Washington: "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government."

Aug. 30: Lodge, just eight days in-country, cables Washington that since removing Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife from the scene is "the prime objective ... this surely cannot be done by working through Diem who wishes he had more Nhus, not less. The best chance of doing it is by the generals taking over the government lock, stock and barrel."

Aug. 31: Kennedy, hearing that President Diem might be negotiating a secret deal with the North Vietnamese, orders all cables dealing with the coup destroyed.

Oct. 5: CIA agent Lucien Conein cables Washington from Saigon that General Duong Van Minh, "Big Minh," has confided his plans for a coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem. Topping Minh's options is an "assassination" of Diem's brothers, Ngo Dinh Nhu and Ngo Dinh Can.

This option, Conein relates, is what the coup plotters believe would be the "easiest plan." The alternative would be a bloody military conflict between the generals and the forces that would rally to Diem.

Lodge cables Washington the same day urging that the U.S. "not attempt to thwart" the coup, that it offer to study the overall plan except for "assassination" details, and that it guarantee U.S. aid once the plans are executed.

Nov. 1, 9:37 a.m.: Lodge cables Washington that he just met with Diem and spoke of his "admiration" and "sentiments of friendship" toward him. He's also told Diem not to worry about a coup.

4 p.m.: Lodge cables Washington that the coup is underway. He sends a transcript of his final conversation with Diem in which he advises President Diem that the coup plotters were offering him "safe conduct out of the country."

Nov. 2: Lodge cables Kennedy that Diem and his brother Nhu had been captured in a church and later shot.

Nov. 6: Lodge received "eyes only" cable from Washington: "We necessarily faced and accepted the possibility that our position might encourage a change of government. With renewed appreciation for a fine job. John F. Kennedy."

By far, the nastiest revelation in Reeves' book is that the United States could have saved Diem's life.

Having captured the South Vietnamese president, the generals asked the CIA to get Diem and his brother out of the country. The highly-equipped U.S. mission, under the sole direction of Kennedy's man-in-Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, informed them it would take at least 24 hours to get a plane.

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