

Cable Tied JFK Aides to Diem Death

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A former Central Intelligence Agency operative in Vietnam said yesterday he saw a copy of what was alleged to be a cable linking top Kennedy administration officials to the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Nhu.

The former agent, Louis Conine, said he was shown the copy by William Lambert, former investigative reporter for Time magazine, last December.

"The thrust of the cable was a strong recommendation that the junta (of anti-Diem generals in Saigon) would be better off without the presence of Diem and Nhu alive," Conine recalled. Nhu was Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

Conine, who was deeply involved in last-minute efforts to spirit Diem and Nhu out of South Vietnam to political asylum in November, 1963, said he had never seen such a cable during his office tenure in Vietnam.

"When I read the copy of the cable I was shocked," Conine recalled. "I have never seen a cable so explicit. You don't say things like that. But I assumed at the time it was real. The wording was beautiful."

The issue of secret cables of instruction from Washington on the Diem-Nhu assassination was injected into the Watergate case yesterday. Sources close to the investigation said that former acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray III destroyed documents which implicated the late President Kennedy in the assassinations at the direction of presidential aides John D. Ehrlichman and John W. Dean III.

Investigative sources said the cables were fabricated by Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt Jr., a former CIA agent.

There was no evidence that the document in Lambert's possession came from the Hunt file.

Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who was chief military adviser to President Kennedy at the time of the assassinations, said yesterday that he, too, was shown a copy of the cable by Lambert. He said he could not specifically recall the contents but was certain that he had never seen such instructions in the course of his official duties.

Lambert, who is now writing a book and is on special assignment for the New York Times, said the source of his material was not Hunt. "Whether the same material might have been in Hunt's hands is another

question. I suspect it might have been," he said.

The former Time reporter said that he and Conine were well-acquainted with Hunt. "I am not concerned that this document was forged or otherwise spurious," said Lambert. "No other reporter to my knowledge has seen the cable." Lambert declined on grounds of confidentiality to disclose the source of the material.

Conine said the copy of the cable he saw bore the names of prominent Kennedy administration officials. He acknowledged that his memory of the names on the copy of the cable may not be precise—he saw it four months ago—but he recalled those of former Secretary of State Dean Rusk and national security adviser McGeorge Bundy as being among the names listed.

The former CIA operative, whose cloak-and-dagger exploits in Indochina dating back to World War II were legendary, said he could see no rationale for a Washington directive or even a suggestion that Diem be killed.

Dissident Vietnamese generals led by Gen. Duong Van Minh had already established a successful coup against Diem and Conine was trying to arrange air

transportation for the deposed president's evacuation to political exile when the brothers were shot on their way to captivity, Conine related.

"I needed a 24-hour period to get an aircraft with a sufficient range to get Diem and Nhu out of the region," he said. "There was never any question of the junta getting rid of Diem or Nhu. There was nothing on the official U.S. side to that effect. That I can swear to."

The circumstances of the Diem and Nhu assassinations has long been a matter of speculation within the government. President Johnson, in a conversation with newsmen, once said: "On instructions of ours we assassinated Diem and then, by God, I walked into it."

Conine's statement was the first public allusion to a specific document tending to implicate the Kennedy administration in the Diem-Nhu assassinations. The Pentagon Papers asserted that President Kennedy was a deeply shaken by the killings.

Watergate investigative sources said former acting FBI Director Gray was told by Ehrlichman and Dean Hunt that documents taken from Hunt's Executive Office Building safe, including fabricated cables on the assassinations, were "political

dynamic" and should be destroyed.

The only administration officials who could have seen the material before its destruction, as far as can be determined, were Ehrlichman, Dean, and Gray.

Henry Cabot Lodge, U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam at the time of the assassinations, said categorically yesterday there was no instruction of any sort from Washington concerning the assassination. "I can state absolutely that nobody in the U.S. government ever dreamed of the possibility of the assassination of Diem. Nobody expected it."

Walt W. Rostow, who became President Johnson's national security adviser, also said he never saw nor heard of any such traffic. He stressed that the only historical evidence was that the Kennedy administration was instrumental in the political downfall of Diem, not his death.

A number of former administration officials in key intelligence positions said that while it might be possible to fabricate cables, such as the one shown Conine and Taylor, they would be readily detected. These documents are serially numbered and a bogus cable could be identified easily.