

Nixon's Words on Diem

Basis of '71 Comment on U.S. Complicity in Leader's Death Is Difficult to Find

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WASHINGTON, May 8—On Sept. 16, 1971, President Nixon was asked at a news conference what the United States could do about the one-man residential campaign then in progress in South Vietnam.

The questioner, Peter Lisagor of The Chicago Daily News, took note of Senator Henry M. Jackson's comment that the President possessed considerable leverage because of massive American military and economic assistance to Saigon.

News Analysis

Mr. Nixon replied, in part: "If what the Senator is suggesting is that the United States should use its leverage now to overthrow Thieu, I would remind all concerned that the way we got into Vietnam was through overthrowing Diem, and the complicity in the murder of Diem; and the way to get out of Vietnam, in my opinion, is not to overthrow Thieu."

Little Noticed in 1971

The President's startling assertion of an American role in the murder of Ngo Dinh Diem, the President of South Vietnam, in November, 1963, drew scant attention in 1971.

It had been widely reported at the time of the Diem assassination—and confirmed with the publication of the Pentagon papers in June, 1971—that the Kennedy Administration had played some part in the overthrow of the Diem regime. But no responsible official had ever suggested publicly that the United States Government was guilty of "complicity" in the subsequent murders of President Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

What led Mr. Nixon to say what he did? Why has he never referred to the matter in public since then, even though he has often been asked similar questions? Was his comment in any way related to the cable forged by E. Howard Hunt Jr., a Watergate conspirator, which made the same assertion at almost the same moment?

No clear answer to any of these questions is available, although Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House Press secretary, said today that Mr. Nixon had never seen the forged cable and thus could not have based his answer on it.

According to an authoritative White House source, the President privately explains his statement by saying that he read writings of the late Marguerite Higgins, who was a war correspondent in Vietnam, suggesting American complicity in the murders. It is not known which of Miss Higgins's works Mr. Nixon was referring to.

The President's general attitude, the source continued, is that "our involvement in the coup overthrowing Diem made the murder inevitable."

But in his comment, Mr. Nixon was far more explicit than that, asserting American involvement in both the overthrow and the murder.

It is clear that the idea for the President's comment did not come from the bureaucracy. In the days before Mr. Nixon's news conferences, an elaborate briefing book is drawn up for his consideration, with foreign-policy sections provided largely by the National Security Council staff and edited and redrafted by Henry A. Kissinger, Mr. Nixon's adviser on national security.

No Reference Reported

A member of the council staff said today that the material submitted before the 1971 news conference contained no reference to the Diem coup. In fact, he said, no briefing material ever sent to Mr. Nixon from the council contained any such data.

"That is not a part of Administration doctrine," the aide said. "I have never seen it in a position paper or a research effort or anything providing documentation. The only reference to it we have around here is that one curious news conference statement."

"You won't find it in any bibliography. It must have been the President's personal view, expressed in the rather loose context of a press conference, on the basis of some information that came to him privately at the time."

At the time, the White House was preoccupied with the Pentagon papers, publication of which had begun in June.

Support of Coup Told

In August and October, 1963, the narrative contained in the papers recounted, the United States gave its support to a cabal of army generals determined to oust Mr. Diem. The key American operative in communicating with the plotters was Lieut. Col. Lucien Conein of the Central Intelligence Agency, who was with them as they began their coup d'état.

Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge became so deeply involved, the papers showed, that he won Washington's approval for a plan to provide sanctuary for the families of the conspirators if they failed. The White House cabled Mr. Lodge that "it is in the interest of the U. S. Government that it [the coup] should succeed."

But the papers gave no indication that Mr. Lodge or any other American expected Mr. Diem to be murdered. In fact, in a telephone conversation with the Vietnamese leader, recorded in the papers, the Ambassador said: "If I can do anything for your physical safety, please telephone me."

Colonel Conein said this week that he, too, had expected no assassinations.

Mr. Diem and his brother were picked up by a Land Rover after having escaped from their palace during the coup, probably through a tunnel. They were taken to a church in suburban Cholon, placed in an armored personnel carrier and shot.

Immediately after the publication of the Pentagon papers, on July 6, 1971, Mr. Hunt, a former Central Intelligence Agency employe, went to work at the White House. His first assignment was to investigate the Pentagon papers leak.

Charles W. Bray 3d, the State Department spokesman confirmed that Mr. Hunt had been given copies of 240 cables to and from Saigon "on or about Sept. 20, 1971," after David Young of the White House

staff, who was also investigating the leaks, interceded with William B. Macomber Jr. Mr. Macomber was then Deputy Under Secretary of State for Management and is now Ambassador to Turkey.

Hunt's Testimony

In testimony to the Watergate grand jury, released yesterday in Los Angeles in connection with the Pentagon papers trial, Mr. Hunt said that he had been asked by Charles W. Colson, then an assistant to the President, whether any of the materials he had obtained showed any complicity by President Kennedy.

He later forged a cable, Mr. Hunt also testified, to show direct Kennedy involvement in the murders. He said that Mr. Colson had directed him to do this; Mr. Colson denied it.

The sequence of events here is muddy; it is not clear, for example, whether Mr. Hunt forged the cable only after obtaining the State Department files, or whether he did so on the basis of other materials that he obtained elsewhere.

If Mr. Bray's date is correct, and Mr. Hunt's forgery was done after he saw the State Department files, Mr. Nixon's comment could not have been based on the forgery, because the news conference took place on Sept. 16, four days before Mr. Hunt, by Mr. Bray's account, looked at the files.

Colson Action Suggested

A former White House official suggested that Mr. Colson had discussed the Hunt project, which was well under way by Sept. 16, with someone else in the White House, perhaps with Mr. Nixon himself, and that the idea of Kennedy complicity was planted, directly or indirectly, in Mr. Nixon's mind.

Mr. Colson himself suggested, sometime in October, a connection between the President's comment and Mr. Hunt.

He asked William Lambert, an investigative reporter, whether he had noticed Mr. Nixon's remark, suggested that "there's a big story there" and steered Mr. Lambert to Mr. Hunt for details.

But Mr. Colson denied today having ever shown the cable to the President or having discussed it with him. Busy preparing for a grand jury appearance tomorrow, he could not be reached for explanation of his conduct with Mr. Lambert.