

# Papers Bare Diem Pressure

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WASHINGTON — The late President John F. Kennedy and his leading advisers were intimately involved in the maneuvering that led to the downfall of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, top-secret State Department and Pentagon documents reveal.

The documents show that Kennedy decided at a National Security Council meeting on Sept. 17, 1963, to put "escalatory pressure" on Diem to get rid of his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, chief of the secret police.

The documents also recommended action against any Diem moves to counter his generals or negotiate with North Vietnam.

## Fact Finding

The NSC also decided to send Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Gen. Maxwell Taylor on a fact finding mission to Vietnam.

They reported back on Oct. 2 and from that point, the documents indicate, there was a growing consensus at the top of the administration that it would not be possible to get rid of Nhu without also getting rid of Diem.

The coup came on Nov. 1 and Diem, who had been installed in power by the United States in 1954, was assassinated. The President and his leading advisers disavowed any connection with his bloody end. But two months earlier, Roger Hilsman, assistant secretary of state for the Far East, had recommended in an Aug. 30 memo to Secretary of State Dean Rusk:

"Unconditional surrender should be the terms for the Ngo family . . . Diem should be treated as the generals wish."

## Two Memos

The Aug. 30 memo and another by Hilsman dated Sept. 16 — both declassified by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 but until now tightly held — were turned over to the Chicago Sun-Times by the Citizens Commission of Inquiry into U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam.

The other documents are

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included in the top-secret Pentagon history of the war. They reveal a battle over Diem's fate, with the State Department urging his ouster and the Pentagon insisting that the United States stick with him.

One important voice raised for possible disengagement was that of the President's brother, the late Robert F. Kennedy.

Hilsman's first memo, prepared for an Aug. 31 NSC meeting, warned that Diem might move to open "neutralization negotiations" with North Vietnam.

## Hit North Viets

If North Vietnam threatened to intervene on Diem's side, Hilsman recommended, the United States should "let it be known unequivocally that we shall hit the DRV (North Vietnam) with all that is necessary to force it to desist."

If Diem chose to make a last stand — a "gotterdammerung" (twilight of the gods) — Hilsman urged his superiors to "encourage the

coup group to fight the battle to the end and to destroy the palace if necessary to gain victory."

The Hilsman memos and the Pentagon documents illuminate a period of increasing U.S. dissatisfaction with Diem and his brother that began May 8 and ended with the Nov. 1 coup.

On May 8, government forces fired on Buddhist celebrators in Hue and there ensued what became known as the Buddhist crisis, in which several priests and nuns burned themselves to death in the streets of major Vietnamese cities.

The self-immolations were reported throughout the world, bringing down increasing criticism on the Diem regime — and on the U.S. government for supporting it. The Buddhists became the rallying point for all non-Communist opposition to Diem and Nhu.

Nhu's wife made matters worse by referring to the priests' self-sacrifice as "Buddhist barbecues."

On Aug. 21, nine days before Hilsman's first memo, government forces under the

direction of Nhu and Diem attacked major Buddhist pagodas in Hue and Saigon, killing any monks who resisted.

The government crisis intensified because the attack at first was blamed on the Vietnamese military — which stoutly denied it had any part in the anti-Buddhist moves.

Leading generals reported to U.S. officials that they feared Diem and Nhu might institute a purge within the military — and perhaps seek an accommodation with North Vietnam.

## Military Coup

Hilsman wrote the Aug. 30 memo at a time when U.S. officials believed a military coup — or action by Diem against the military — was imminent. This proved mistaken.

From the end of August until early October, the secret Pentagon study and Hilsman's second memo reveal, the United States struggled to decide how to keep Diem as president but get rid of Nhu.

A conclusion of the Sept. 17 NSC meeting, for example,

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was that the best of all possible worlds would be for Diem to stay in power with Nhu out of the picture.

In fact, after it was determined that Nhu's special forces and not the army had been responsible for the attacks on the pagodas, the documents make it clear that there was unanimous agreement among Kennedy and his advisers that pressure should be applied on Diem to purge Nhu.

The documents indicate that it was also decided at the NSC meeting to identify and begin cultivating alternative leadership — believed to mean the generals.

The decision was made formal after two alternatives were debated at the Sept. 17 NSC meeting — “escalatory pressure” and “reconciliation” — the latter representing acquiescence in the status quo under Diem and Nhu.

The alternatives had been laid out the day before in Hilsman's second memo, which used the terms “reconciliation track” and “pressures and persuasion track.”

“My own judgment,” Hilsman declared, “is that the

‘reconciliation track’ will not work. I think Nhu has already decided on an adventure. I think he feels that the progress already made in the war and the U.S. material on hand gives him freedom to launch on a course that has a minimum and a maximum goal.

#### Two Goals

“The minimum goal would be sharply to reduce the American presence in those key positions which have political significance in the provinces and the strategic hamlet program and to avoid any meaningful concessions that would go against his mandarin, ‘personalist’ vision of the future of Vietnam.

“The maximum goal, I would think, would be a deal with North Vietnam for a truce in the war, a complete removal of the U.S. presence and a ‘neutralist’ or ‘Titoist’ but still separate South Vietnam.”

The “escalatory pressure” track, as it was explained at the Sept. 17 NSC meeting, called for the withdrawal of AID (Agency for International Development) support for the Diem regime, the remov-

al of support for Nhu's CIA-backed special forces, and an order to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to remain aloof from Diem—that is, out of contact.

#### Mission Report

McNamara and Taylor reported on their mission to Vietnam at an Oct. 2 NSC meeting. Afterward, the White House put out a press release.

It said, in part:

“Secretary McNamara and Gen. Taylor reported that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965 . . .

“They reported that by the end of this year the U.S. program for training the Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1000 U.S. military personnel could be withdrawn.

“The political situation in South Vietnam remains deeply serious. The U.S. has made clear its continuing opposition to any repressive actions in South Vietnam. While such actions have not yet significantly affected the military effort, they could do so in the future.”

Hilsman's Aug. 30 memo recommended that, if Diem chose to leave the country with his family, the United States provide him with a plane but only if he agreed to go to France or another European country.

“Under no circumstances,” he wrote, “should the Nhus be permitted to remain in Southeast Asia in close proximity to Vietnam because of the plots they will try to mount to regain power.”

Hilsman warned that Diem might appeal to French President Charles de Gaulle “for political support for neutralization of Vietnam.”

Hilsman urged Rusk to resist any such arrangement, adding: “We should point out publicly that Vietnam cannot be effectively neutralized unless the Communists are removed from control of North Vietnam . . .

“Once an anti-Diem coup is started in South Vietnam, we can point to the obvious refusal of South Vietnam to accept a Diem-Communist coalition.”