

Highlights of the Period

The Kennedy Administration's "complicity" in the 1963 overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem is documented in the Pentagon study, which says that this episode "inadvertently deepened" United States involvement in the Vietnam conflict.

Here, in chronological order, are highlights of this period:

MAY-JUNE, 1963

Buddhist protests against Diem Government flare into violence after Government troops attack demonstrators in Hue. Crisis worsens as confrontations become focus for widespread political disaffection with Diem's regime and Ngo Dinh Nhu, his brother.

AUGUST, 1963

Saigon regime, violating pledge to U.S. that it will seek to conciliate Buddhists, stages midnight raids on Buddhist pagodas. Many arrests and beatings.

First request for U.S. support of coup plot made to C.I.A. agent.

George W. Ball, Acting Secretary of State, tells Henry Cabot Lodge, new U.S. Ambassador, that Diem must "remove" Nhu or "we can no longer support Diem." Says "appropriate military commanders" can be pledged "direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism." Authorizes Ambassador to threaten aid cut-off unless jailed Buddhists are released.

Lodge replies chances of "Diem's meeting our demands are virtually nil." Says "by making them, we give Nhu chance to forestall" coup. Suggests "we go straight to generals with our demands."

C.I.A. agents make contact with two plotters.

Col. Lucien Conein, a top C.I.A. agent, meets with Lieut. Gen. Duong Van Minh, plot leader. Minh asks U.S. to suspend economic aid to Diem regime as signal of support. It is indicated that C.I.A. gave plotters sensitive information about loyalist forces.

Lodge, replying to query from President Kennedy, says "U.S. prestige" is publicly committed; "there is no turning back..."

National Security Council meeting "reaffirmed basic course." U.S. "will support a coup which has a good chance of succeeding." Gen. Paul D. Harkins, U.S. military commander, Saigon, told to state "he is prepared to establish liaison" with plotters. Lodge authorized to "announce suspension of aid" at will.

Private Kennedy message to Lodge pledges "everything possible to help you conclude this operation successfully," but asks continuing reports to allow

possible "reverse" signal. Says "we must go to win, but it will be better to change our minds than fail."

Ambassador reports breakdown in conspiracy.

National Security Council meets. Paul M. Kattenburg, head of Vietnam Interdepartmental Working Group, urges U.S. disengagement. Secretary of State Dean Rusk says U.S. will not pull out "until the war is won," and "will not run a coup."

OCTOBER, 1963

Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of Joint Chiefs, propose after Diem meeting that U.S. "work with the Diem regime but not support it." Urge economic pressure.

Conein, and other C.I.A. agents renew contact with Minh and other plotters. Lodge urges assurances U.S. will not "thwart" coup.

President accepts McNamara-Taylor proposals; series of economic cut-offs. Study says this "leaves ambiguous" question whether aid suspension is meant as "green light for coup."

Aid cut-offs start.

White House messages to Ambassador stress "surveillance and readiness," not "active promotion" of coup. Study says they stress desire for "plausibility of denial" of U.S. involvement.

Coup canceled. Leader cites Harkins's attitude as reason. Harkins denies "trying to thwart" coup but "would not discuss coups that were not my business."

Doubts about coup revived in Washington, study says. White House wants "option of judging and warning on any plan with poor prospects of success."

Lodge opposes any move to "pour cold water" on plot.

Lodge and Diem have "fruitless, frustrating" meeting. Ambassador says Diem "gave me a blank look and changed the subject" when asked for "some one thing" to "favorably impress" U.S. opinion.

White House tells Lodge to "discourage" plot if quick success is unlikely. Lodge replies U.S. is unable to "delay or discourage a coup."

NOVEMBER, 1963

Coup proceeds on schedule. Diem, on telephone with Lodge, asks "attitude of the U.S." Lodge replies he is not "well enough informed" to say, tells him: "If I can do anything for your personal safety, please call me."

Pentagon study says Diem finally accepts Generals' offer of safe-conduct out of country; he and brother are shot to death by armored units.