

The U.S. Role in

Following is the text of an Aug. 30, 1963, memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman to Secretary of State Dean Rusk recommending the United States encourage and assist a coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.

The courses of action that Diem and Nhu could take to maintain themselves in power and the United States responses thereto are as follows:

1. DIEM-NHU MOVE: Pre-emptive arrest and assassination of opposition military officers and-or Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho.

U.S. RESPONSE:

(A) We should continue to pass warnings to these officials about their danger.

(B) CAS (code label for the Central Intelligence Agency) should explore the feasibility of prompt supply of a warning system to these officials.

(S) If several general officers are arrested, we should invoke aid sanctions to obtain their release on the ground that they are essential to successful prosecution of the war against the Viet Cong.

(D) Encouragement of prompt initiation of the coup is the best way of avoiding arrests and assassinations of generals.

2. DIEM-NHU MOVE: Sudden switch in assignments of opposition generals or their dispatch on special missions outside of Saigon.

U.S. RESPONSE: We should recommend that the opposition generals delay in carrying out any such orders and move promptly to execution of the coup.

3. DIEM NHU MOVE: Declaration of Ambassador Lodge (Henry Cabot Lodge) and-or other important American officials in Vietnam as personae non gratae.

U.S. RESPONSE: (A) We should stall on the removal of our officials until the efforts to mount a coup have borne fruit. This situation again shows the importance of speed on the part of both the U.S. and Vietnamese sides. We should also suspend aid.

(B) Should the GVN (South Vietnam) begin to bring physical pressure on our personnel, we should introduce U.S. forces to safeguard their security.

4. DIEM-NHU MOVE: Blackmail pressure on U.S. dependents in Vietnam, such as arrests, a few mysterious deaths or—more likely—disguised threats (like Nhu's recent threat to raze Saigon in case of a coup).

U.S. RESPONSE:

(A) We should maintain our sang-froid with respect to threats.

(B) We should urge American personnel to take such precautions as avoidance of unnecessary movement and concentration of families. We should also issue arms to selected American personnel.

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(C) We should demand the release of any Americans arrested and should insist for the record on proper protection of Americans by the GVN. (GVN failure to furnish this protection could serve as one of the justifications for open U.S. intervention.)

(D) We should evacuate dependents and other nonofficial personnel at the earliest possible moment that Ambassador Lodge considers it consistent with the over-all operation.

(E) We should intervene with U.S. forces if necessary to protect Americans during evacuation and to obtain the release of those arrested.

5. DIEM-NHU MOVE: Severance of all aid ties with the U.S., ouster of all U.S. personnel (except for limited



A wave of self immolations—such as this by Rev. Quang Duc in a Saigon street in 1963—brought

worldwide condemnation of the regime of President Diem, and on this country for supporting him.

—AP Photo

diplomatic staff, and demand for removal of all U.S.-controlled military equipment in Vietnam.

U.S. RESPONSE:

(A) We should stall in removing U.S. personnel and equipment from Vietnam. This move by the GVN would again, however, underscore the necessity for speed in our counteraction.

(B) If Diem-Nhu move to seize U.S.-controlled equipment, we should resist by all necessary force.

6. DIEM-NHU MOVE: Political move toward the DRV (North Vietnam) such as opening of neutralization negotiations, or rumors and indirect threats of such a move

U.S. RESPONSE:

(A) Ambassador Lodge should give Diem a clear warning of the dangers of such a course, and point out its continued pursuit will lead to cessation of U.S. aid.

(B) Encourage the generals to move promptly with a coup.

(C) We should publicize to the world at an appropriate moment any threats or move by Diem or Nhu toward the DRV in order to show the two-edged game they are playing and help justify publicly our counteractions.

(D) If the DRV threatens to respond to an anti-Diem coup by sending troops openly to South Vietnam, we

should let it know unequivocally that we shall hit the DRV with all that is necessary to force it to desist.

(E) We should be prepared to take such military action.

7. DIEM-NHU MOVE: Appeal to French President Charles de Gaulle for political support for neutralization of Vietnam.

U.S. RESPONSE:

(A) We should point out publicly that Vietnam cannot be effectively neutralized unless the Communists are removed from control of North Vietnam. If a coalition between Diem and the Communists is suggested, we should reply that this would be the avenue to a Communist takeover in view of the relative strength of the two principals in the coalition. 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.

8. DIEM-NHU MOVE: If hostilities start between the GVN and a coup group, Diem and Nhu will seek to negotiate in order to play for time (as during the November, 1966, coup attempt) and rally loyal forces to Saigon.

U.S. RESPONSE:

(A) The U.S. must define its objective with crystal clearness. If we try to save Diem by encouraging negotia-

tions between him and a coup group, while a coup is in progress, we shall greatly increase the risk of an unsuccessful outcome of the coup attempt. Our objective should, therefore, clearly be to bring the whole Ngo family under the control of the coup group.

(B) We should warn the coup group to press any military advantage it gains to its logical conclusion without stopping to negotiate.

(C) We should use all possible means to influence pro-Diem generals like Cao to move to the coup side. For example, Gen. Harkins could send a direct message to Cao pointing to the consequences of a continued stand in support of the Ngo family and the advantage of shifting over to the coup group.

(D) We should use, or encourage the coup group to use: military measures to prevent any loyal forces outside Saigon from rallying to Diem's support. For example, we can jam radio communications between Diem and these forces and we can encourage interdiction of transportation by blowing up bridges.

(E) We should encourage the coup group to capture and remove promptly from Vietnam any members of the Ngo family outside Saigon, including Can and Thuc who are normally in Hue. We should assist in this operation to any extent necessary.

9. DIEM-NHU MOVE: Continuation of hostilities in Saigon as long as possible in the hope that the U.S. will weaken because of the bloodbath which may involve U.S. personnel.

U.S. RESPONSE:

(A) We should maintain our sangfroid and encourage the coup forces to continue the fight to the extent necessary.

(B) We should seek to bring officers loyal to Diem over to our side by direct approaches by MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) or CAS inducements.

(C) We should encourage the coup group to take necessary action to deprive the loyal forces of access to supplies.

(D) We should make full use of any U.S. equipment available in Vietnam to assist the coup group.

(E) If necessary, we should bring in U.S. combat forces to assist the coup group to achieve victory.

10. DIEM-NHU MOVE: A Gotterdammerung in the palace.

U.S. RESPONSE:

(A) We should encourage the coup group to fight the battle to the end and to destroy the palace if necessary to gain victory.

(B) Unconditional surrender should be the terms for the Ngo family since it will otherwise seek to outmaneuver both the coup forces and the United States. If the family is taken alive, the Nhuses should be banished to France or any other European country willing to receive them. Diem should be treated as the generals wish.

11. DIEM-NHU MOVE: Flight out of the country (this is unlikely as it would not be in keeping with the past conduct of the Ngo family).

U.S. RESPONSE:

We should be prepared, with the knowledge of the coup group, to furnish a plane to take the Ngo family to France or other European country which will receive it. Under no circumstances should the Nhuses be permitted to remain in Southeast Asia in close proximity to Vietnam because of the plots they will try to mount to regain power. If the generals decide to exile Diem, he should also be sent outside Southeast Asia.