

Death Knell for Diem

In October, the tempo of events quickened. In Saigon on Oct. 2, the analyst writes, Colonel Conein "accidentally" ran into General Don, who proposed a date that evening in Nhatrang. That night, the C.I.A. man learned that the conspiracy was on the tracks again and that General Minh, its leader, wanted to discuss the details. Ambassador Lodge approved the meeting.

Oct. 5 was a fateful day both in Saigon and in Washington. For the first time in weeks, another Buddhist monk burned himself to death in the central marketplace in Saigon. Mr. Richardson, the C.I.A. chief whose links to Mr. Nhu had aroused suspicions among the Army generals, left South Vietnam after what are described as behind-the-scenes efforts by Ambassador Lodge to have him transferred. And President Kennedy took far-reaching decisions to apply major economic sanctions against the Diem regime.

At 8:30 A.M. that same day Colonel Conein went to General Minh's headquarters for a 70-minute meeting. According to the C.I.A. account of the meeting, the two men talked in French. The South Vietnamese general, nicknamed Big Minh by his colleagues because of his burly build, disclaimed any personal political ambition.

But he said that the army commanders felt the war would be lost

unless the government was changed soon and that he "must know" the American Government's position on a change of regime "within the very near future." The general said he did not expect "any specific American support" for the coup d'état but did need assurances that the Americans would not block it. He did not press for an on-the-spot commitment, but asked for another date with Colonel Conein.

Lodge Suggests Caution

General Minh outlined several possible tactics. The two main ones called for retaining President Diem but assassinating his two powerful and feared brothers Mr. Nhu and Ngo Dinh Can, the regime's proconsul in Central Vietnam; or, a head-on military battle for control of Saigon and the government against roughly 5,500 loyalist troops in the capital.

Because of the abortive plot in August, Ambassador Lodge reacted warily. In a special message to Secretary Rusk, he commented that neither he nor General Harkins had "great faith in Big Minh." [See text, further Lodge comments to Rusk, Oct. 5.] Nonetheless, he recommended giving the generals assurance that the United States would not "thwart" their coup, that it would review their plans—"other

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than assassination plans"—and that it would continue aid to any future government that gave promise of gaining popular support and winning the war. He said General Harkins concurred in these recommendations.

In Washington, too, events were gaining momentum. On Oct. 2, President Kennedy had received the recommendations of the McNamara-Taylor mission (drafted before the new Saigon contacts) urging tight new pressures on the regime in the hopes of gaining some reforms and simultaneously advocating covert contacts with "possible alternative leadership" without actively promoting a coup.

The President accepted all the report's proposals. According to the Pentagon account, he specifically authorized suspension of economic subsidies for South Vietnam's commercial imports, a freeze on loans to enable Saigon to build a waterworks and an electric-power plant for the capital region, and, significantly, a cut-off of financial support for the Vietnamese Special Forces — controlled by Mr. Nhu — unless they were put under the Joint General Staff, headed by the plotting generals.

There were to be no public announcements, and the various steps were to be unrolled consecutively at Mr. Lodge's discretion. But in a city as keyed-up and alert to every nuance in American policy as Saigon, the Pentagon study notes, these steps were bound to be read in many quarters as the death knell for the Diem regime. Only a month before, he recalls, the cut-offs had been discussed — and approved — as a signal of American support to the generals, if necessary.

The analyst comments that the documentary record in early October "leaves ambiguous" whether the White House intended the aid suspensions to be a "green light" for the coup. But he says that they were interpreted that way by the generals. The Diem regime reacted furiously. Its press outlets publicized the freeze on import subsidies on Oct. 7 and accused Washington of sabotaging the war effort.

'Surveillance and Readiness'

In a White House message—sent on Oct. 5 through C.I.A. channels for tight security within the American Government—Washington gave Ambassador Lodge careful coaching. It instructed him that "no initiative should now be taken to give any active covert encouragement to a coup." But he was to organize an "urgent covert effort . . . to identify and build up contacts with possible alternative leadership as and when it appears." [See text, Kennedy position.]

The Washington message emphasized that the objective should be "surveillance and readiness" rather than "active promotion of a coup." It told Mr. Lodge that "you alone" should manage the operation, through the C.I.A. chief in Saigon.

These instructions were transmitted before Washington had received the report of the Minh-Conein contact, the Pentagon study observes. For, on the very next day, with time to digest that report, Washington took a considerably more flexible approach.

The C.I.A. relayed new White House instructions on Oct. 6. In a passage that Ambassador Lodge interpreted as signaling a desire for a change of regime—though General Harkins later disputed him vigorously on this point—Washington said that while it did not wish to "stimulate" a coup, it also did not want "to leave the impression that the U.S.

would thwart a change of government." Nor would it withhold aid from a new regime. [See text, Washington cable to Lodge.]

In view of General Minh's modest request for American acquiescence, the generals could interpret this as a go-ahead.

The Oct. 6 message also ordered the C.I.A. man to obtain "detailed information" to help Washington assess the plot's chances. Yet it cautioned against "being drawn into reviewing or advising on operational plans or other actions" that might eventually "tend to identify U.S. too closely" with a coup. In the language of the Oct. 5 cable, Washington wanted to preserve "plausibility of denial."

The new American position was conveyed to General Minh by his C.I.A. contact about Oct. 10.

On Oct. 18, with the cut-off of commercial import subsidies already causing financial scares in Saigon, the Pentagon study reports that General Harkins informed President Diem that American funds were being cut off from the Special Forces. The narrative notes that by then, the coup plans were well advanced and the American move against what amounted to a Presidential Palace guard was an obvious spur to the conspirators.

Tempo of Attacks Was Rising

By mid-October the Administration was hearing very disturbing intelligence estimates on the war. On Oct. 19 the C.I.A. reported that the tempo of Vietcong attacks was rising, Government troops "missing in action" were increasing and other military indicators were "turning sour," as the Pentagon account puts it. In a controversial report on Oct. 22, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research contested the military optimism of recent months. It concluded that there had been "an unfavorable shift in the military balance" since July and that the Government would have been in trouble even without the Buddhist crisis.

Against this background, the conspiracy in Saigon hit a snag.

The narrative recounts that General Don, in a state of agitation, told Colonel Conein on Oct. 23 that the coup had been scheduled for Oct. 26—and then called off because General Harkins had discouraged it on Oct. 22. General Don's account was that General Harkins complained to him that a Vietnamese colonel had discussed the coup plans with an American officer, asking for support—all without sanction from the senior generals.

General Harkins, he said, had insisted that American officers should not be approached about a coup because it distracted them from the war. He implied that General Harkins might have leaked word of the plot to the palace. He demanded reassurance of American support—and got it from Colonel Conein.

The Pentagon study quotes a message from Ambassador Lodge on Oct. 23 saying that he had talked with General Harkins who said he had misunderstood Washington's policy guidance. The Ambassador quoted the general as saying he hoped he had not upset the delicate arrangements and would tell General Don that his previous remarks did not reflect American policy. That very night, the Pentagon version says, General Harkins saw General Don to retract his earlier statements.

On Oct. 24, however, in a message to General Taylor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Harkins disputed Mr. Lodge's version of the events. He denied having violated Washington's policy guidance, saying he had merely

rebuffed General Don's suggestion that they meet again to discuss coup plans.

"I told Don that I would not discuss coups that were not my business though I had heard rumors of many," General Harkins told Washington. Insisting that he was "not trying to thwart a change in government," he did, however, voice the prophetic fear that if the Diem regime was toppled, its fall might touch off factional warfare within the army that would eventually "interfere with the war effort."

'Avoid Any Involvement'

General Taylor's immediate reply was: "View here is that your actions in disengaging from the coup discussions were correct and that you should continue to avoid any involvement." This evidently reflected Washington's earlier instructions that Mr. Lodge alone should manage the coup contacts through the C.I.A.

The incident once again opened the breach between the Ambassador and the general. It underscored not only their differences in views but also, the Pentagon analyst says, their total lack of coordination.

Moreover, it deepened the Vietnamese generals' suspicion of General Harkins, whom they had always mistrusted because of his closeness to President Diem. Not only did they subsequently refuse to talk to him about the coup out of fear of leaks to the palace, the account says, but they consistently refused to show any Americans their detailed plans despite repeated promises to do so—a point that bedeviled Washington.

Nonetheless, Colonel Conein's reassurances had sufficiently emboldened them that, according to a C.I.A. information report, they passed the word to Ambassador Lodge on Oct. 24 that the coup would occur before Nov. 2. President Diem also chose Oct. 24 finally to break the ice with Mr. Lodge by inviting him to spend Sunday, Oct. 27, with him at the presidential villa in the mountain resort of Dalat.

But in Washington General Harkins's reports had revived doubts about the coup, and it was now Mr. Lodge's turn to be on the defensive.

The Pentagon study recounts that Mr. McCone, the C.I.A. director, and McGeorge Bundy, the President's special assistant for national security, sent out cablegrams expressing worry that General Don might be a double-agent from the Diem-Nhu regime trying to entrap the United States. Mr. Bundy also suggested replacing Colonel Conein as the C.I.A. contact man.

Effort to Counter Worries

On Oct. 25 Ambassador Lodge tried to put Washington's mind at ease. In a message to Mr. Bundy, he discounted the likelihood that General Don was engaged in a "provocation" and stoutly defended Colonel Conein.

The Ambassador also argued against any temptation to "pour cold water" on the plot. While he acknowledged that struggles among successors of the Diem regime could damage the war effort, he contended that it was "at least an even bet that the next government would not bungle and stumble as much as the present one has." [See text, Lodge message to Bundy, Oct. 25.]

The White House reply, on Oct. 25, endorsed his view that the United States "should not be in position of thwarting coup" but urged him to give the White House "the option of judging and warning on any plan with poor prospects of success." [See text, Bundy's reply on coup hazards.]

It indicated that President Kennedy's main worries, as in August, were failure and the appearance of complicity. "We are particularly concerned," the White House cablegram said, "about hazard that an unsuccessful coup, however carefully we avoid direct engagement, will be laid at our door by public opinion almost everywhere."

What neither the Ambassador nor the White House knew, the Pentagon narrative notes, was that the coup plotters were even then manipulating the balance of military forces around Saigon in their favor, double-dealing with Mr. Nhu and outwitting him.

The pivotal figure was Maj. Gen. Ton That Dinh, the military governor of Saigon and commander of the III Corps—all the regular army troops in the capital region. The Pentagon account describes how General Don played upon General Dinh's vanity to maneuver him into a clash with Mr. Nhu, thereby enlisting his cooperation for the coup plot.

A Trap for the Other Generals

Through another channel, however, Mr. Nhu learned of the conspiracy and, confronting General Dinh with that news, told him to help lay a trap for the other generals. This maneuver called for starting a false coup to lure the anti-Diemists into the open and then using General Dinh's forces to crush the real plot.

The young general informed the other conspirators of Mr. Nhu's counterplot. To be on the safe side, in case he was really loyal to Mr. Nhu, they recruited troop commanders under him.

In Saigon, the atmosphere had become one of impending violence. So intense was the maneuvering, according to the Pentagon study, that it was "virtually impossible to keep track of all the plots against the regime." The United States Embassy in one cable to Washington identified 10 dissident groups in addition to the generals' plot.

Nonetheless President Diem, at his Oct. 27 meeting with Mr. Lodge, seemed unprepared to yield an inch—a "fruitless, frustrating" exchange, according to the Pentagon version.

Paraphrasing the Ambassador's report, the study recounts that President Diem inquired about the suspension of American aid and in reply Mr. Lodge asked about the release of hundreds of arrested Buddhists and student demonstrators, and about reopening schools shut by the regime in fear of further turbulence. President Diem, the analyst says, "offered excuses and complaints."

Finally, Ambassador Lodge said: "Mr. President, every single specific suggestion which I have made, you have rejected. Isn't there some one thing you may think of that is within your capabilities to do and that would favorably impress U.S. opinion?"

The Ambassador reported that President Diem "gave me a blank look and changed the subject."

At Saigon airport the next morning,

as President Diem and Mr. Lodge were about to go to a ceremony dedicating a Vietnamese power plant, General Don daringly took the Ambassador aside.

The Pentagon account says General Don "asked [Mr. Lodge] if Conein was authorized to speak for him."

"Lodge assured Don that he was," the account continues. "Don said that the coup must be thoroughly Vietnamese and that the U.S. must not interfere. Lodge agreed, adding that the U.S. wanted no satellites but would not thwart a coup. When Lodge asked about the timing of the coup, Don replied the generals were not yet ready."

Later that day, General Don met with Colonel Conein and urged that Mr. Lodge make no change in his previously announced plans to leave on a trip to Washington on Oct. 31 for fear that postponement might tip off the Presidential Palace. General Don also disclosed that General Dinh, the III Corps commander, had been neutralized, shifting the military balance in the coup's favor.

By Oct. 29, the analyst comments, Ambassador Lodge clearly felt that the United States was "committed" to the coup and that it was too late for second thoughts, and he communicated those views forcefully to Washington.

After reporting the support of prominent leaders, including Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho, for the coup, the Ambassador said he felt an attempt was "imminent."

"Whether this coup fails or succeeds," Mr. Lodge said, "the U.S.G. must be prepared to accept the fact that we will be blamed, however unjustifiably; and finally that no positive action by the U.S.G. can prevent a coup attempt—short of informing Diem and Nhu with all the opprobrium that such an action would entail."

With the first Vietnamese troop movements preparatory to the coup already under way, the Pentagon gave orders to have a naval task force stand off the Vietnamese coast "if events required," as the account puts it. When Mr. Lodge was informed of this, he urged discretion lest the Diem regime be alerted.

Events now had an ineluctable momentum. But, in Washington, the study reports, Secretary McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were vacillating over the continuing differences between Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins.

Keeping Harkins Informed

They put their anxieties before a National Security Council meeting on Oct. 29, and the White House then instructed Ambassador Lodge to show General Harkins, who had been away in Bangkok briefly, the relevant messages to be sure that he would be fully aware of the coup arrangements. If Mr. Lodge was to go through with his trip home as scheduled, Washington felt that General Harkins—rather than the Ambassador's deputy, as would have been customary—should be in charge of the American mission.

Belatedly apprised of the continuing Don-Conein contacts and the Ambassador's latest recommendations to Washington, General Harkins sent off three angry cables to General Taylor on Oct. 30.

He was "irate," the analyst remarks, not only at having been excluded by Mr. Lodge from information about the coup but also at reading the Ambassador's gloomy assessments of how the war was going, which diametrically opposed his own views. He protested to Washington that the Ambassador was keeping him in the dark.

More important, he declared, in a message cited by the study, there was a "basic" difference between them in interpreting Washington's instructions.

Since receiving the Oct. 5 guidance from the White House, General Harkins said, he had been operating in the belief that the basic American policy line was that "no initiative" should be taken to encourage a coup. But he said Mr. Lodge took the position that the Oct. 6 message—"not to thwart" a coup—modified the policy line and indicated that "a change of government is desired and . . . the only way to bring about such a change is by a coup."

Moreover, General Harkins sought to undermine confidence in the conspiracy by accusing General Don of lying or serving as a double agent. Overlooking his own earlier refusal to talk about the coup, General Harkins told Washington:

"What he [Don] told me is diametrically opposed to what he told Colonel Conein. He told Conein the coup would be before Nov. 2. He told me he was not planning a coup when I sat with Don and Big Minh for two hours during the parade last Saturday. No one mentioned coups." [See text, Harkins message to Taylor, Oct. 30.]

Prolonged Fighting Was Feared

The Harkins messages shook Washington's confidence severely and the White House conveyed its anxieties to Ambassador Lodge on Oct. 30. It reckoned the military balance of forces as "approximately equal," raising the danger of prolonged fighting or even defeat. If the coup group could not show prospects for quick success, the White House said, "we should discourage them from proceeding since a miscalculation could result in jeopardizing the U.S. position in Southeast Asia." [See text, Bundy cable to Lodge.]

Contrary to Mr. Lodge's position, the White House also felt that a word from the Americans could delay the coup but it refrained from ordering him to halt the conspiracy.

That same night, the documentary record discloses, Mr. Lodge replied, suggesting an even deeper involvement. In answer to Washington's worries, he held to the view that the Americans did not "have the power to delay or discourage a coup." [See text, Lodge response to Bundy, Oct. 30.]

At this late hour, he urged that the United States keep "hands off," not only because he believed "Vietnam's best generals are involved" but also because he shared their expectation that some wavering units would join the coup.

"If we were convinced that the coup was going to fail, we would, of course, do everything we could to stop it," he pledged. But that was not his expectation.

Mr. Lodge dismissed the suggestion of opening up a second channel to the

generals. Instead, he suggested that the cabal might need "funds at the last moment with which to buy off potential opposition. To the extent that these funds can be passed discreetly, I believe we should furnish them."

The Ambassador took a considerably less apocalyptic view of failure than did Washington. "We will have to pick up the pieces as best we can at that time," he said. "We have a commitment to the generals from the August episode to attempt to help in the evacuation of their dependents. We should try to live up to this if conditions will permit."

He predicted that once the coup was under way, the Diem regime "will request me or General Harkins to use our influence to call it off." His response, he said, would be that "our influence could not be superior to [President Diem's] and if he is unable to call it off, we would certainly be unable to do so."

In the event of a deadlock or some negotiations that required the "removal of key personalities," he suggested Saigon as a good destination because "the absence of press, communications, etc., would allow us some leeway to make further decision as to their ultimate disposition."

And he said that if asked to provide political asylum for senior officials, presumably meaning not only President Diem but such opponents as Vice President Tho, "We would probably have to grant it."

In addition, the Ambassador responded to General Harkins's attacks on his operating methods by objecting vigorously to the Administration's plans to put the general in charge of the American mission if the Ambassador left Saigon. He thought it wrong, he said, to put a military man in control during such a politically charged time.

'An Old Friend of Mine'

"This is said impersonally," the Ambassador commented, "since General Harkins is a splendid general and an old friend of mine to whom I would gladly entrust anything I have."

His message ended by saying: "General Harkins has read this and does not concur."

The final White House message to Ambassador Lodge, which went out later that night, was stern in tone and refused to accept his contention that the United States was powerless to stop a coup without betraying it to the Diem regime.

"If you should conclude that there is not clearly a high prospect of success," the White House told Mr. Lodge, "you should communicate this doubt to generals in a way calculated to persuade them to desist at least until chances are better." [See text, further Bundy instructions, Oct. 30.]

But once again Washington left the matter in Mr. Lodge's hands by allowing him to make the final judgment on the prospects for the coup's success. It asserted, moreover, that once a coup was under way, "it is in the interest of the U.S. Government that it should succeed."

The message also set out guidelines for the American mission in the event of a coup—to reject appeals for direct intervention from either side; if necessary, to be ready to play some intermediary role but to maintain strict neutrality without the appearance of pressure on either side; and if the coup failed, to "afford asylum . . . to those to whom there is any expressed or implied obligation" with the hope that they would use other countries' embassies as well.

The White House urged the Ambassador not to feel committed to this scheduled visit home on Oct. 31. But it insisted that if he left and the coup did occur, General Harkins would be put in charge. Mr. Lodge, of course, was forced to cancel his trip to Washington, and the coup was launched on Nov. 1.

A Call From Admiral Felt

That morning the Ambassador called on President Diem with Adm. Harry D. Felt, commander in chief of American forces in the Pacific. At noon, Admiral Felt went to the airport, unaware that the military forces were already gathering for the final assault on the Diem regime.

The coup unrolled like clockwork. At 1:30 P.M., coup forces seized the police

headquarters, radio stations, the airport and other installations and began their attacks on the Presidential Palace and the Special Forces barracks.

When loyal officers alerted Mr. Nhu to the first crucial moves, he thought it all part of his devious counterplot with General Dinh and he told the loyal commanders not to intervene. But later, when the attack on the palace began, he tried to call General Dinh to order the counterattack only to be told that the general was unavailable.

Within three hours all resistance had been crushed except at the Presidential Palace, and the generals broadcast demands for the Ngo brothers to resign. President Diem replied by asking them to come to the palace for consultations—a tactic used in 1960 to delay the coup long enough for loyal troops to reach the city. But the generals refused.

Not long afterward, President Diem telephoned Ambassador Lodge to ask where the United States stood. Their conversation was recorded by the Embassy:

DIEM: Some units have made a rebellion, and I want to know what is the attitude of the U.S.

LODGE: I do not feel well enough informed to be able to tell you. I have heard the shooting, but am not acquainted with all the facts. Also it is 4:30 A.M. in Washington and the U.S. Government cannot possibly have a view.

DIEM: But you have must have general ideas. After all, I am a chief of state. I have tried to do my duty. I want to do now what duty and good sense require. I believe in duty above all.

LODGE: You have certainly done your duty. As I told you only this morning, I admire your courage and your great contributions to your country. No one can take away from you the credit for all you have done. Now I am worried about your physical safety. I have a report that those in charge of the current activity offer you and your brother safe conduct out of the country if you resign. Have you heard this?

DIEM: No. [And then, after a pause] You have my telephone number.

LODGE: Yes. If I can do anything for your physical safety, please call me.

DIEM: I am trying to re-establish order.

By Secret Tunnel to Safety

While fighting continued at the palace, President Diem and his brother escaped through a secret tunnel and hid in Cholon, the Chinese section of the capital. Shortly after dawn, the last palace stronghold surrendered.

Throughout the night, the Pentagon study recounts, President Diem kept contact by phone with the generals who, urging him to surrender, offered a guarantee of safe conduct to the airport to permit him to leave South Vietnam. At 6:20 A.M. the President finally agreed, but did not tell General Minh his whereabouts.

According to the account, the Ngo brothers were tracked down by some armored units commanded by a long-time enemy of the President, and, after their capture, they were shot to death inside an armored car carrying them to the Joint General Staff headquarters.

Washington delayed immediate recognition of the new regime because, the study says, Secretary Rusk felt that a delay would reduce the appearance of American complicity in the coup and would make the generals look less like American stooges. Mr. Rusk also discouraged any large delegations of generals from calling on Ambassador Lodge as if they were "reporting in."

The Kennedy Administration is described as shocked and dismayed by the murders of the two leaders but says it had been "reluctant to intervene on behalf of Diem and Nhu for fear of appearing to offer support to them or reneging on our pledges of noninterference to the generals."

The Americans had also reportedly counted on the coup committee's offer of safe conduct to the Ngo brothers which, until the very last moment—when the armored units were just about to seize them—President Diem had repeatedly rejected.