

U.S. and Diem's Overthrow: Step by Step

The Pentagon's secret study of the Vietnam war discloses that President Kennedy knew and approved of plans for the military coup d'état that overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

"Our complicity in his overthrow heightened our responsibilities and our commitment" in Vietnam, the study finds.

In August and October of 1963, the narrative recounts, the United States gave its support to a cabal of army generals bent on removing the controversial leader, whose rise to power Mr. Kennedy had backed in speeches in the middle nineteen-fifties and who had been the anchor of American policy in Vietnam for nine years.

The coup, one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of the American involvement in Vietnam, was a watershed. As the Pentagon study observes, it was a time when Washington—with the Diem regime gone—could have reconsidered its entire commitment to South Vietnam and decided to disengage.

At least two Administration officials advocated disengagement but, according to the Pentagon study, it "was never

seriously considered a policy alternative because of the assumption that an independent, non-Communist SVN was too important a strategic interest to abandon."

The effect, according to this account, was that the United States, discovering after the coup that the war against the Vietcong had been going much worse than officials previously thought, felt compelled to do more—rather than less—for Saigon. By supporting the anti-Diem coup, the analyst asserts, "the U.S. inadvertently deepened its involvement. The inadvertence is the key factor."

According to the Pentagon account of the 1963 events in Saigon, Washington did not originate the anti-Diem coup, nor did American forces intervene in any way, even to try to prevent the assassinations of Mr. Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who, as the chief Diem political adviser, had accumulated immense power. Popular discontent with the Diem regime focused on Mr. Nhu and his wife.

But for weeks—and with the White House informed every step of the way—

the American mission in Saigon maintained secret contacts with the plotting generals through one of the Central Intelligence Agency's most experienced and versatile operatives, an Indochina veteran, Lieut. Col. Lucien Conein. The colonel, who is now in retirement, first landed in Vietnam in 1944 by parachute for the Office of Strategic Services, the wartime forerunner of the C.I.A.

So trusted by the Vietnamese generals was Colonel Conein that he was in their midst at Vietnamese General Staff headquarters as they launched the coup. Indeed, on Oct. 25, a week earlier, in a cable to McGeorge Bundy, the President's special assistant for national security, Ambassador Lodge had occasion to describe Colonel Conein of the C.I.A.—referring to the agency, in code terminology, as C.A.S.—as the indispensable man:

"C.A.S. has been punctilious in carrying out my instructions. I have personally approved each meeting between General Don [one of three main plotters] and Conein who has carried out my

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orders in each instance explicitly. . . .

"Conein, as you know, is a friend of some 18 years' standing with General Don, and General Don has expressed extreme reluctance to deal with anyone else. I do not believe the involvement of another American in close contact with the generals would be productive." [See text, Lodge message to Bundy, Oct. 25, Page 11.]

So closely did the C.I.A. work with the generals, official documents reveal, that it provided them with vital intelligence about the arms and encampments of pro-Diem military forces after Mr. Lodge had authorized C.I.A. participation in tactical planning of the coup.

So intimately tied to the conspiracy did the Ambassador himself become that he offered refuge to the families of the generals if their plot failed—and he obtained Washington's approval. Near the end, he also sent a message to Washington seeking authority to put up the money for bribes to win over officers still loyal to President Diem. [See text, Lodge response to Bundy, Oct. 30.]

'We Must Go to Win . . .'

The fear of failure—fed by bitterly conflicting advice from Ambassador Lodge and Gen. Paul D. Harkins, chief of the American Military Assistance Command in Saigon—dogged President Kennedy to the end.

In late August, with a coup by the generals expected any hour, President Kennedy sent a private message to Ambassador Lodge. Possibly thinking back to the collapse of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, he said: "I know from experience that failure is more destructive than an appearance of indecision. . . . When we go, we must go to win, but it will be better to change our minds than fail."

In his Aug. 30 cablegram, obtained by The New York Times along with the Pentagon study, the President also pledged "We will do all that we can

to help you conclude this operation successfully."

On Oct. 30, after the plot had been postponed and later revived, the White House cabled Mr. Lodge with instructions to delay further any coup that did not have "a high prospect of success." But it left the ultimate judgment up to the Ambassador and asserted that once a coup "under responsible leadership" had begun, "it is in the interest of the U.S. Government that it should succeed." [See text, Bundy cable to Lodge, Oct. 30.]

The conclusions of the Pentagon study run contrary to the denial of American involvement by Ambassador Lodge in a press interview on June 29, 1964, and the impression given by the more carefully worded disavowals of American responsibility published in the memoirs of some Kennedy Administration officials.

"For the military coup d'état against Ngo Dinh Diem, the U.S. must accept its full share of responsibility," the Pentagon account asserts.

"Beginning in August of 1963 we variously authorized, sanctioned and encouraged the coup efforts of the Vietnamese generals and offered full support for a successor government. In October we cut off aid to Diem in a direct rebuff, giving a green light to the generals. We maintained clandestine contact with them throughout the planning and execution of the coup and sought to review their operational plans and proposed new government."

Step-by-Step U.S. Collusion

The intrigues of the Vietnamese generals and of Mr. Nhu have largely been recounted before. Two added elements emerge from the Pentagon study: the step-by-step American collusion with the conspiracy, revealed previously only in shadowy outline; and the feud inside the American Government that brought it close to paralysis at decisive moments.

For if the Diem regime was a house divided against itself, so was the Kennedy Administration.

In Saigon, the two chief antagonists

were Ambassador Lodge, considered even by admirers an aloof, shrewd Massachusetts Brahmin politician; and General Harkins, an affable, athletic cavalry officer who had been a protégé of the World War II tank commander, Maj. Gen. George S. Patton, 3d.

As the Pentagon study recounts it, the Ambassador quickly became a partisan of the anti-Diem plot, while General Harkins resented what he felt would be shabby treatment of President Diem. "I would suggest we try not to change horses too quickly," the general declared in a cable to Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Oct. 30, less than 48 hours before the coup. [See text, Harkins message to Taylor.]

"After all, rightly or wrongly, we have backed Diem for eight long hard years. To me it seems incongruous now to get him down, kick him around and get rid of him. The U.S. has been his

mother superior and father confessor since he's been in office and he leaned on us heavily."

The Ambassador and the general clashed at almost every juncture on almost every major issue and their controversy reverberated at the highest levels of government in Washington.

At one point, the study relates, the two men even relayed contradictory messages to the plotters. Subsequently, Ambassador Lodge held such tight control over the conspiratorial maneuvering that General Harkins protested to Washington that he was being kept in the dark.

Ultimately, the Pentagon narrative shows, it was Mr. Lodge—a supremely self-confident ambassador, a former Republican vice-presidential nominee with independent political power, firm in his views, jealous of his ambassadorial prerogatives, intent on asserting his full authority—who exerted critical influence on the Government.