

# Shock for Washington

Six days later the dam broke. South Vietnamese Special Forces troops in white helmets carried out midnight raids against Buddhist pagodas throughout the country. More than 1,400 people, mostly monks, were arrested and many of them beaten. Two days later, the army generals conspiring against President Diem first sought official American support.

The pagoda raids stunned Washington. "In their brutality and their blunt repudiation of Diem's solemn word to Nolting, they were a direct, impudent slap in the face for the U.S.," the narrative asserts. "For better or worse, the Aug. 21 pagoda raids decided the issue for us."

American officials found them particularly galling because the raiding parties were led by Vietnamese Special Forces, which were largely financed by the C.I.A. for covert war operations, but which had in effect become the private army of Mr. Nhu.

The Pentagon account describes how Mr. Nhu had telephone lines to the United States Embassy cut to keep American officials ignorant and how he fooled them into believing the army had carried out the crackdown.

Because the army had declared martial law the day before and because some of those raiding parties wore borrowed paratroop uniforms, the embassy initially put the blame on Saigon's army in reporting to Washington.

Actually, the study explains, Mr. Nhu had bypassed the regular army chain of command and had ordered the raids personally. This version does not make it clear whether President Diem had approved in advance or merely accepted after the fact.

## Denounced in Two Capitals

Both in Washington and Saigon, the United States denounced the raids and dissociated itself from such repressive policies. Mr. Lodge, in Honolulu for final briefings, was told to fly at once to Saigon where he landed on the morning of Aug. 22. Significantly, the next section of the Pentagon narrative is entitled "Lodge vs. Diem."

What the study terms the "first requests for support" came from the acting chief of staff of the armed forces, Maj. Gen. Tran Van Don, a French-trained Vietnamese aristocrat, and one of his deputies, Maj. Gen. Le Van Kim, reputed to be the real brains behind the coup. Despite their high positions, neither general had direct command over troops because Mr. Nhu had become suspicious of them.

Drawing on a C.I.A. information report, the study recounts that on Aug. 23, General Don told an American agent that the Voice of America should retract its broadcasts blaming the army for the pagoda raids and put out an accurate version in order to help the army. It was time, he said, for the United States to make its position known on internal Vietnamese affairs.

General Kim was more explicit. The pagoda raids, he told another agent,

showed the lengths to which Mr. Nhu would go, and a firm American stand now in favor of his removal would unify the army and permit it to take action against both Mr. Nhu and his wife.

Significantly, the embassy reported that high civilian officials were also telling American diplomats that the Nhus' removal was vital. Nguyen Dinh Thuan, President Diem's Defense Minister, gave the blunt advice that "under no circumstances should the United States acquiesce in what the Nhus had done." Foreign Minister Vu Van Mau resigned and shaved his head like a Buddhist monk in protest.

Less than 48 hours after his arrival in Saigon, Ambassador Lodge cabled the State Department to report the coup feelers but cautioned that the most pivotal commanders around Saigon were still loyal to the Ngo brothers. Other officers' loyalties were unknown. Those circumstances, Mr. Lodge reckoned, would make American support of a coup d'état a "shot in the dark."

## Initial U.S. Sanction for Coup

His message reached Washington Saturday morning, Aug. 24, setting off what became one of the most controversial actions in the Kennedy Administration. The State Department, over the signature of Acting Secretary George W. Ball, sent Ambassador Lodge a reply that served as the initial American sanction for the coup.

It began by saying that the United States could not tolerate the powerful role of Mr. Nhu and his wife any longer. The key passage went on to declare in the stuttering language of cables:

"We wish give Diem reasonable opportunity to remove Nhus, but if he remains obdurate, then we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem. You may also tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism." [See text, Washington message to Lodge, Aug. 24.]

Moreover, the message gave Ambassador Lodge broad leeway on how to proceed, and pledged to "back you to the hilt on actions you take to achieve our objectives."

This crucial message also cleared the way for public retractions of the earlier Voice of America broadcasts and instructed Mr. Lodge to pass the word that Washington could not provide further military and economic support to South Vietnam unless "prompt dramatic actions" were taken to release the jailed Buddhists and fulfill their demands.

The Pentagon study, drawing upon Roger Hilsman's book "To Move a Nation," published in 1964, explains that the controversial message was drafted by Mr. Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State; W. Averell Harriman, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs; Michael V. Forrestal, White House specialist on Vietnam and South-

east Asia, and Mr. Ball. The prime movers were said to be Mr. Hilsman and Mr. Harriman.

The necessary top-level approval of the cablegram was complicated by the fact that President Kennedy was in Hyannisport, Mass., for the weekend. Secretary of State Dean Rusk was in New York and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and John A. McCone, Director of Central Intelligence, were on vacation.

## Revisions on the Telephone

According to the Hilsman account, both the President and Mr. Rusk were furnished early drafts of the cable and, through several telephone conversations, participated in revising the message before it was sent. Roswell L. Gilpatric, Acting Secretary of Defense, approved it for the civilian side of the Pentagon. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was given a belated check by telephone while out to dinner and, upon being told the President had approved the message, accepted on behalf of the military.

The Pentagon study reports that on Monday, when all the principal officers of government returned to Washington, several, especially General Taylor, had second thoughts. But by then it was too late.

In Saigon, the State Department's message had set a new chain of events in motion. The cablegram arrived in Saigon at midday Sunday, Aug. 25, and according to the Pentagon account, Ambassador Lodge immediately summoned General Harkins and John H. Richardson, the C.I.A. station chief. After their strategy session, Mr. Lodge urgently cabled the State Department, proposing a change in tactics:

"Believe that chances of Diem's meeting our demands are virtually nil. At same time, by making them we give Nhu chance to forestall or block action by military. Risk, we believe, is not worth taking, with Nhu in control combat forces Saigon.

"Therefore, propose we go straight to generals with our demands, without informing Diem. Would tell them we prepared have Diem without Nhus but it is in effect up to them whether we keep him. Would insist generals take steps to release Buddhist leaders and carry out June 16 agreement. Request immediate modification instructions." [See text, Lodge reply to Washington, Aug. 25.]

The Ambassador said that General Harkins concurred, and a separate report from Mr. Richardson to C.I.A. headquarters fully endorsed Mr. Lodge's approach.

The immediate reply, obtained by The New York Times though not cited in the Pentagon narrative, was from Mr. Hilsman and Mr. Ball: "Agree to modification proposed."

It is not known whether this was cleared with President Kennedy and other senior officials, but under normal bureaucratic practice Mr. Hilsman would have initiated it.

#### Keeping Away From the Generals

When that cable reached Saigon, the Pentagon account reports, Mr. Lodge called another strategy session Monday morning. His inner circle decided that the "American official hand should not show," meaning that General Harkins would not talk to the generals. The contact men would be Colonel Conein, an old acquaintance of several of the generals, and another C.I.A. officer; the second agent's contacts petered out eventually.

The C.I.A. men were not only to tell the generals the gist of Washington's Aug. 24 message but also, as Mr. Richardson advised headquarters on Aug. 26, to convey the following message: "We cannot be of any help during initial action of assuming power of the state. Entirely their own action, win or lose. Don't expect to be bailed out." The plotters, moreover, were to be informed that the United States "hoped bloodshed can be avoided or reduced to absolute minimum." [See text, C.I.A. aide's cable.]

In Washington on that same Monday, President Kennedy, informed of the misgivings of General Taylor and others, called together the National Security Council.

The Pentagon study, with very limited direct access to written records of Council meetings and none for these crucial days, accepts the Hilsman book's recollection that the principal doubters were Secretary McNamara, Mr. McCone and General Taylor, opposed by the senior State Department officials.

The Council met again on Tuesday. The Hilsman book reports that at that session Mr. Nolting, the former Ambassador, was doubtful that President Diem could be separated from his brother, as the Pentagon leaders proposed, but he also spoke with prophetic doubt about the capacity of the generals to lead the country.

The upshot, the Pentagon study continues, was that Saigon was asked on Aug. 27 to give more details about the plot and to assess the effect of delaying the coup.

This opened the breach between Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins, in turn worsening the rift in Washington.

#### Leader of Plot Identified

The documentary record indicates that Washington's message reached Saigon after the two C.I.A. agents had made separate contacts with two additional members of the army cabal to convey the American position. Significantly, they learned that the plot leader was Lieut. Gen. Duong Van Minh, military adviser to the Presidency, a good combat commander and the general with the strongest following among the officer corps.

His supporters included not only Generals Don and Kim but also Maj. Gen. Tran Thien Khiem, executive officer of the Joint General Staff; Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, commander of the II Corps region stretching northward from Saigon, and Col. Nguyen Van Thieu, commander of the Fifth Division just north of the capital. But Saigon itself and the Mekong Delta to the south were in the hands of supporters of President Diem.

From this balance of force, the Pentagon study recounts, Ambassador Lodge sized up the coup's prospects favorably, arguing that "chances of success would be diminished by delay."

General Harkins sent a separate message that he saw no clear-cut advantage for the coup plotters and no reason for "crash approval" of the plot. He

doubted that the coup would be launched until the United States gave the word. His cablegram pledged full support to the Ambassador in carrying out the earlier instructions but, the analyst notes, it cryptically implied that his earlier concurrence had "been volunteered," evidently meaning that Mr. Lodge had overstated his views. But the incident is left unexplained.

A third message from Mr. Richardson, the C.I.A. chief, backed Ambassador Lodge. "Situation here has reached point of no return," he told the agency's headquarters. "Saigon is armed camp. Current indications are the Ngo family have dug in for last ditch battle. There may be widespread fighting in Saigon and serious loss of life." [See text, C.I.A. station chief's cable, Aug. 28.]

But Mr. Richardson warned that even if the Ngo brothers prevailed, "They and Vietnam will stagger on to final defeat at the hands of their own people and the VC."

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese generals, accustomed over the years to being warned by Americans not to engage in conspiracies against their own government, were having their own worries about the Americans.

#### Clear Sign of Support Sought

On Aug. 29, the Pentagon study says, General Minh himself met Colonel Conein and asked for clear evidence that the United States would not betray the conspiracy to Mr. Nhu. As a clear sign of American support, he asked that Washington suspend economic aid to the Diem regime.

A second general made another check with the result that, according to the Pentagon study, the Ambassador authorized the C.I.A. to "assist in tactical planning" of the coup d'état. A subsequent C.I.A. message, on Oct. 5, discloses that in August the American agents provided the coup organizers with sensitive information including a detailed plan and an armaments inventory for Camp Longthanh, a secret installation of the loyalist Special Forces commanded by Col. Le Quang Tung.

The Americans in Saigon were well ahead of the policy makers in Washington. The top-level debate there, the Pentagon study relates, had become so heated and testy that President Kennedy personally cabled Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins asking each man again for his "independent judgment."

The Ambassador's reply to the President was an ardent case for the coup:

"We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem Government. There is no turning back in part because U. S. prestige is already publicly committed to this end in large measure and will become more so as facts leak out. In a more fundamental sense, there is no turning back because there is no possibility, in my view, that the war can be won under a Diem administration. . . ." [See text, Lodge cable to Rusk, Aug. 29.]

Rejecting the idea of seeing President Diem, Mr. Lodge suggested instead that General Harkins be authorized personally to repeat earlier C.I.A. messages to the generals to ease their doubts. If that proved inadequate, the Ambassador wanted to suspend American aid as General Minh had requested.

#### Harkins Stuck to His Guns

The study recounts that General Harkins, for his part, stuck to his position that there was still time, without endangering the plotters, for a final approach to President Diem with an ultimatum to drop Mr. Nhu.

With tension high in both Saigon and Washington, the National Security Council held a climactic meeting on Aug. 29. A State Department message to Saigon that night indicated that President Kennedy leaned more on Ambassador Lodge's advice than on General Harkins's. [See text, Rusk cable to Lodge.]

The N.S.C., the cablegram said, had "reaffirmed basic course" and, specifically authorized General Harkins to repeat earlier C.I.A. messages to the plotters. It told him to stress American support for the move "to eliminate the Nhus from the government" but it did not mention President Diem one way or the other.

Nonetheless, it reflected the prevailing acceptance of Ambassador Lodge's view that there was no turning back. "The U.S.G. will support a coup which has good chance of succeeding but plans no direct involvement of U.S. armed forces," it said. "Harkins should state that he is prepared to establish liaison with the coup planners and to review their plans, but will not engage directly in joint coup planning."

Moreover, the message authorized Mr. Lodge "to announce suspension of aid" to the Diem regime whenever and however he chose. But with an eye to the Administration's public image, it cautioned him to "manage" such an announcement so as to "minimize appearance of collusion" with the generals.

The State Department cablegram explained that the question of a "last approach" to President Diem—advocated by General Harkins—"remains undecided." Secretary Rusk, possibly reflecting some personal doubts, raised this issue in a separate message to Mr. Lodge. But the Ambassador rejected the idea out of hand.

At this point Mr. Kennedy sent his totally private message to Ambassador Lodge. The President said he had given his "full support" to the earlier message and promised that Washington would do everything possible "to help you conclude this operation successfully."

#### Way Kept Open for a Reversal

He asked the Ambassador to provide him with a running assessment of the coup's prospects right up to the "go signal" to permit him to "reverse previous instructions," if necessary.

The Ambassador's brief reply, on Aug. 30, acknowledged the President's right to change directions but warned him that, since "the operation" had to be Vietnamese-run, the American President might not be able to control it.

As matters turned out, Washington's agonizing had been to no avail. For, according to the study, General Harkins's first direct contact with the conspirators brought news that General Minh had called off the coup for the time being, fearing a bloody standoff in Saigon.

According to the Pentagon account, General Harkins was also told that Mr.

Richardson's careful cultivation of Mr. Nhu had aroused suspicions among the generals that the C.I.A. chief might be undercutting them and that the President's brother was on the C.I.A. payroll. Later this would become an important issue and would lead to Mr. Richardson's replacement.

But on Aug. 31, Ambassador Lodge reported to Washington the collapse of the conspiracy and the end of the coup phase. He told Secretary Rusk—who had worried in a cable only the day before about the lack of "bone and muscle" among the conspirators—that there was "neither the will nor the organization among the generals to accomplish anything."

Mr. Lodge also reported hearing that Mr. Nhu was secretly dealing with Hanoi and the Vietcong through the French and Polish ambassadors, both of whose governments favored a neutralist solution between North and South Vietnam.

Washington was in a quandary. It had finally taken the risk of seeking an alternative to the Diem regime only to see the attempt dissolve. As the Pentagon narrative says: "The U.S. found itself at the end of August, 1963, without a policy and with most of its bridges burned."

The members of the National Security Council—minus the President—held a "where do we go from here?" meeting on Aug. 31. That session was revealing, the author comments, because of the "rambling inability to focus on the problem"—the sense of an administration adrift.

The most controversial position was advanced by Paul M. Kattenburg, a 39-year-old diplomat who headed the Vietnam Interdepartmental Working Group. He proposed disengagement—thereby, according to the Pentagon version, becoming the first official on record in a high-level Vietnam policy meeting to pursue to its logical conclusion the analysis that the war effort was irretrievable, either with or without President Diem.

Until he spoke, the trend of the discussion seemed to favor reluctantly sliding back toward some workable relationship with the Diem regime since there seemed no alternative. Secretary Rusk commented that it was "unrealistic" to insist that Mr. Nhu "must go" and Secretary McNamara pushed for reopening high-level contact with the Presidential Palace. [See text, memo on Washington meeting, Aug. 31.]

#### Rusk's Two-Point Policy

In rebuttal, Assistant Secretary of State Hilsman reminded the group of the crippling malaise within the Vietnamese Government and the impact on the American image and policy elsewhere if Washington acquiesced "to a strong Nhu-dominated government."

According to the minutes of the meeting, Mr. Kattenburg pushed this argument a step further by asserting that if the United States tried to "live with" the Diem regime, it would be "thrown out of the country in six months." In the next six months to a year, he argued the war effort would go steadily downhill to the point where the Vietnamese people "will gradually go to the other side and we will be obliged to leave."

His analysis was immediately dismissed by Vice President Johnson, Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara. Mr. Rusk was reported in the minutes as insisting that American policy be based on two points—"that we will not pull out of Vietnam until the war is won, and that we will not run a coup." Mr. McNamara endorsed this view.

Vice President Johnson said he agreed completely, reportedly declaring that "we should stop playing cops and robbers and get back to talking straight to the [Saigon Government]... and once again go about winning the war."

It was more easily said than done. As the Pentagon study recounts, the Kennedy Administration passed through the next five weeks without any real policy but with three general notions in mind: first, the compulsion to send special missions to reassess the situation in Vietnam; second, the attempt to coerce the Diem regime into moderation through economic and propaganda pressures; and third, Ambassador Lodge's efforts to persuade the Nhus to leave the country while giving the cold shoulder to President Diem.

President Kennedy, in a television interview Sept. 2, applied his personal pressure on the Diem regime for the first time. The South Vietnamese Government, he said, would have to "take steps to bring back popular support" after the Buddhist repressions, otherwise the war could not be won. Success was possible, he said "with changes in policy and perhaps with personnel." But he did not specify whom he meant.

At another inconclusive National Security Council meeting four days later, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy returned to the question of disengagement. The Pentagon account reports him as reasoning that if the war was unwinnable by any foreseeable South Vietnamese regime, it was time to get out of Vietnam. But, if the Diem regime was the obstacle, he contended, then Ambassador Lodge should be given the power to bring about the necessary changes.

But the Administration's immediate response to its dilemma was—at Secretary McNamara's suggestion—to send a fact-finding mission to Vietnam for a fresh look: Maj. Gen. Victor H. Krulak, the Pentagon's top-ranking expert in counterinsurgency warfare, and Joseph A. Mendenhall, the former political counselor in the Saigon Embassy.

#### Was It the Same Country?

The two men came back after an exhausting four-day tour with such diametrically opposed assessments that President Kennedy was moved to ask, "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?"

Dissatisfied, President Kennedy dispatched Secretary McNamara and General Taylor on a new fact-finding mission on Sept. 23. They met with President Diem on Sept. 29 and although Mr. McNamara had the authority to press the South Vietnamese ruler to remove his brother from power, he did not raise the issue. No explanation is given for this significant omission.

The Pentagon analyst comments that the report of their mission, submitted on Oct. 2, tried to bridge the Lodge-Harkins gap, and in the process reflected for the first time serious doubts in Mr. McNamara's mind.

The military assessment—which the Secretary of Defense radically revised in retrospect after the successful Nov. 1 coup—was generally optimistic. It reported "great progress" in the last year with no ill effects on the conduct of the war from the prolonged political crisis, and asserted that the "bulk" of American troops could be withdrawn by the end of 1965. The two men proposed and—with the President's approval—announced that 1,000 Americans would be pulled out by the end of 1963. [See text, McNamara-Taylor report, Oct. 2.]

Their political analysis found discontent with the Diem-Nhu regime a "seething problem" that could boil over at any time. Unaware of the revived plotting, they discounted prospects for an early coup on grounds that the generals appeared to have "little stomach" for it and proposed that in the meantime, "we should work with the Diem regime but not support it." The study notes that they recommended a series of economic pressures, including an aid cutoff, without indicating whether they remembered that this was the "go" signal that the generals had previously requested.

The Kennedy Administration was already engaged in a pressure campaign that, whatever its intent, was bound to encourage the army generals to try again, as the narrative notes.

#### At the Least, a Vacation

The President's televised remark on the need for possible changes in personnel was the first shot. Next, on Sept. 14, Washington informed the embassy that it was deferring decisions on an \$18.5-million program to finance commercial imports to South Vietnam. Three days later the White House instructed Ambassador Lodge to make new efforts to achieve a "visible reduction" in the influence of the Nhus—preferably by arranging their departure from Vietnam "at least for an extended vacation." [See text. White House cable

to Lodge, Sept. 17.]

It gave him broad authority to use aid as leverage in this venture, "bearing in mind that it is not our current policy to cut off aid entirely." In particular, it was suggested, Mr. Lodge might want to limit or reroute aid now going "to or through Nhu" or his collaborators. It also urged him—without ordering him—to resume contact with President Diem. But Mr. Lodge demurred.

Washington's high-level messages to the Ambassador throughout the fall of 1963 are notable for the unusual deference they show him. President Kennedy himself proceeded with delicacy on those rare occasions when he overruled the Ambassador. Once, in a personal cablegram to Mr. Lodge in mid-September, he commented that, as the son of a former Ambassador, "I am well trained in the importance of protecting the effectiveness of the man-on-the-spot." The record shows that the President understood, too, how firm and explicit he had to be to overrule the Ambassador—and, significantly, he did not do so in the final days before the coup.