

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. [Lodge was in fact receiving Conein's regular reports from the coup command post at Joint General Staff headquarters.] Also it is 4:30 A.M. in Washington and the U.S. Government cannot possibly have a view." [As Lodge knew, CIA, State, White House, and Defense officials were very much awake at that hour in Washington reading his and Conein's reports on the coup they had facilitated.]

DIEM: "But you must have some 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. Had you heard this?"

DIEM: "No. [Then after a pause, as Diem realized from Lodge's words that the U.S. ambassador was in close contact with coup leaders.] 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."<sup>186</sup>

The rebel troops bombarded the presidential guard barracks and the Gia Long Palace through the night. At 3:30 Saturday morning, the generals ordered an assault to overwhelm Diem's loyalist guards.

CIA agent Lucien Conein was beside the generals at Joint General Staff headquarters. He continued to act as their adviser. They had alerted him a few hours before the coup. Conein had at the generals' request brought "all available money" to the coup headquarters from the CIA's operational funds, \$42,000 worth of piastres—"for food for the rebel troops," as Conein said,<sup>187</sup> and perhaps, as Lodge had said, "to buy off potential opposition."<sup>188</sup> Conein also brought with him a special voice radio "to relay information about the coup to the [Saigon] station and other CIA officers cut into his net."<sup>189</sup> In addition, the generals had set up for him a direct telephone line to the U.S. Embassy. Conein was at the hub of a coup communications system extending from the generals' command post to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and to the Situation Room in the White House. The CIA's coup adviser, Lucien Conein, was totally wired to apply covert power from afar.<sup>190</sup> He and the generals knew the "advice" he was relaying to them from elsewhere could never be attributed to its ultimate sources.

Two of Conein's sources of recommendations to the generals were in the

White House Situation Room. There in the early morning hours of November 1, while the president was sleeping upstairs, McGeorge Bundy and Roger Hilsman were pouring over Conein's blow-by-blow account of the coup. Already looking ahead, they cabled the Saigon Embassy that if the coup should be successful, the generals should justify it publicly by saying that "Nhu was dickering with the Communists to betray the anti-Communist cause. High value of this argument should be emphasized to them at earliest opportunity."<sup>191</sup> The embassy relayed the message through Conein, then cabled back to Bundy and Hilsman, "Point has been made to the generals."<sup>192</sup>

Bundy's and Hilsman's recommendations, which the generals followed after the coup, put another obstacle in the way of Kennedy's withdrawal policy. That anyone might do in Vietnam what Kennedy had already done in Laos was being characterized by Kennedy's own advisers as a betrayal of the anti-communist cause, to be used as the reasonable public justification for a coup d'état in Saigon. Bundy and Hilsman were making it more difficult for Kennedy to negotiate a way out of Vietnam. Moreover, a similar case for "betrayal of the anti-Communist cause" could already be made against JFK to justify a Washington coup.

General Tran Van Don in his circumspect memoir of the Saigon coup reveals another, more urgent mandate that CIA operative Conein passed on to the generals. When General Don told Conein that he suspected the Ngo brothers might no longer be in the presidential palace, Conein said to him with irritation, "Diem and Nhu must be found at any cost."<sup>193</sup>

Diem and Nhu had escaped from the palace in the Friday night darkness, eluding the soldiers surrounding the grounds. They were then driven by an aide to Cholon, where a Chinese businessman gave them overnight refuge in his home.<sup>194</sup> It was from Cholon on Saturday morning that Ngo Dinh Diem made his last phone call to Henry Cabot Lodge. In his descriptions of the coup over the years, Lodge never mentioned his Saturday morning call from Diem. The two men's final exchange was revealed by Lodge's chief aide, Mike Dunn, in an interview in 1986, the year after Lodge's death.<sup>195</sup>

Diem had decided to take seriously the ambassador's parting words to him Friday afternoon: "If I can do anything for your physical safety, please call me." Diem did so Saturday morning.

"That morning," Mike Dunn said, "Diem asked [in his call] if there was something we could do. Lodge put the phone down and went to check on something. I held the line open . . . Lodge told Diem he would offer them asylum and do what he could for them. I wanted to go over—in fact, I asked Lodge if I could go over and take them out. I said, 'Because they are going to kill them.' Told him that right flat out."<sup>196</sup>

Dunn thought if Lodge had forced the issue by sending him over to bring Diem and Nhu out of Cholon, their lives would have been saved—as the man whom Lodge represented, President Kennedy, wanted to happen.

But Lodge said to Dunn, "We can't. We just can't get that involved."<sup>197</sup>

Lucien Conein has said in an interview of his own that Diem also made

three final calls to the generals on Saturday, ultimately surrendering and “requesting only safe conduct to the airport and departure from Vietnam.”<sup>198</sup> Conein said he then called the CIA station. The CIA told him “it would take twenty-four hours to get a plane with sufficient range to fly the brothers non-stop to a country of asylum.”<sup>199</sup> The CIA had made no plans to evacuate Diem and Nhu to avoid their assassinations. Nor, according to the CIA, did the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam have a plane available then with sufficient range to fly Diem and Nhu to asylum, although a plane had apparently been standing by to fly Lodge to Washington. The Ngo brothers would have to remain in Saigon while the generals decided their fate. It did not take long for that to happen.

At 8:00 A.M. Saturday, Diem and Nhu left the house in Cholon to go to a nearby Catholic church. It was All Souls Day. Although the early morning Mass had ended, the brothers were able to receive communion from a priest shortly before a convoy of two armed jeeps and an armored personnel carrier pulled up in front of the church.

After learning the Ngos’ location, General Minh had sent a team of five men to pick them up. Two of the men in the personnel carrier were Major Duong Hieu Nghia, a member of the Dai Viet party that was especially hostile to Diem,<sup>200</sup> and Minh’s personal bodyguard, Captain Nguyen Van Nhung, described as a professional assassin who had killed forty people.<sup>201</sup>

Diem and Nhu were standing on the church steps. From what Lodge and the generals had told him on the phone, Diem thought he was being taken to the airport for a flight to another country. He asked if he could go by the palace to pick up some of his things. The officers said their orders were to take him at once to military headquarters.<sup>202</sup>

As Diem and Nhu were led to the armored personnel carrier, they expressed surprise that they wouldn’t be riding in a car. According to a witness, “Nhu protested that it was unseemly for the president to travel in that fashion.”<sup>203</sup> They were shown how to climb down the hatch into the semi-darkness of the armored vehicle. Captain Nhung went down with them. He tied their hands behind their backs. Major Nghia remained over them in the turret with his submachine gun. The convoy took off.

When the vehicles arrived at 8:30 at Joint General Staff headquarters, the hatch of the personnel carrier was opened. Diem and Nhu were dead. Both men had been “shot in the nape of the neck,” according to Lodge’s report two days later.<sup>204</sup> Nhu had also been stabbed in the chest and shot many times in the back.<sup>205</sup> Years later, two of the officers in the convoy described the assassinations of Diem and Nhu: “Nghia shot point-blank at them with his submachine gun, while Captain Nhung . . . sprayed them with bullets before using a knife on them.”<sup>206</sup>

On Saturday, November 2, at 9:35 A.M., President Kennedy held a meeting at the White House with his principal advisers on Vietnam. As the

meeting began, the fate of Diem and Nhu was unknown. Michael Forrestal walked in with a telegram. He handed it to the president. It was from Lodge. The message was that “Diem and Nhu were both dead, and the coup leaders were claiming their deaths to be suicide.”<sup>207</sup> But Kennedy knew they must have been murdered. General Maxwell Taylor, who was sitting with the president at the cabinet table, has described JFK’s reaction:

“Kennedy leaped to his feet and rushed from the room with a look of shock and dismay on his face which I had never seen before. He had always insisted that Diem must never suffer more than exile and had been led to believe or had persuaded himself that a change in government could be carried out without bloodshed.”<sup>208</sup>

After he learned of Diem’s and Nhu’s deaths, Kennedy was “somber and shaken,” according to Arthur Schlesinger, who “had not seen him so depressed since the Bay of Pigs.”<sup>209</sup>

As in the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy accepted responsibility for the terrible consequences of decisions he had questioned, but not enough. In the case of the coup, he had submitted to the pressures for the August 24 telegram and the downward path that followed, while trying to persuade Lodge to negotiate with Diem, and Diem to change course in time. Both had refused to cooperate. He had sent Torby Macdonald to Saigon to appeal personally to Diem to save his life. Diem had again been unresponsive. When Diem did finally say in effect to Kennedy through Lodge on the morning of November 1, “Tell us what you want and we’ll do it,”<sup>210</sup> it was the eleventh hour before the coup. Lodge’s delayed transmission of Diem’s conciliatory message to Kennedy made certain that JFK would receive it too late.

Kennedy knew many, if not all, of the backstage maneuvers that kept him from reaching Diem in time, and Diem from reaching him. But he also knew he should never have agreed to the August 24 telegram in the first place. And he knew he could have thrown his whole weight against a coup from the beginning, as he had not. He had gone along with the push for a coup, while dragging his feet and seeking a way out of it. He accepted responsibility for consequences he had struggled to avoid, but in the end not enough—the deaths of Diem and Nhu.

But again, as in the Bay of Pigs, he blamed the CIA for manipulation, and in this case, assassination. In his anger at the CIA’s behind-the-scenes role in the deaths of Diem and Nhu, he said to his friend Senator George Smathers, “I’ve got to do something about those bastards.” He told Smathers that “they should be stripped of their exorbitant power.”<sup>211</sup> He was echoing his statement after the Bay of Pigs that he wanted “to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds.”<sup>212</sup>

Kennedy’s anguish at Diem’s death was foreshadowed by his response to the CIA-supported murder of another nationalist leader.

On January 17, 1961, three days before John Kennedy took office as president, Congo leader Patrice Lumumba was assassinated by the Belgian government with the complicity of the CIA.<sup>213</sup> As Madeleine Kalb, author of

172. Black, "Plot to Kill JFK," pp. 5, 34.

173. Ibid.

174. Robert K. Tanenbaum, who was initially in charge of the House Select Committee on Assassinations investigation of JFK's murder, has described a film he saw (in the HSCA evidence) of Cuban exiles in training near Lake Ponchartrain, with scenes that included CIA officer David Atlee Phillips, CIA pilot David Ferrie, and Lee Harvey Oswald. Jim DiEugenio, "The *Probe* Interview: Bob Tanenbaum," *Probe* (July-August 1996), p. 24; with reference to the film depicted in Robert Tanenbaum's fictionalized account of his HSCA experience, *Corruption of Blood* (New York: Signet Books, 1996), pp. 168-71. When an orchestrated media campaign forced HSCA director Richard Sprague to resign, Tanenbaum also left the HSCA rather than participate in "American history that I knew to be absolutely false." Tanenbaum *Probe* interview, p. 16.

175. "Vallee said he returned to his native Chicago from New York City last August [1963] . . ." From "Quiz North Sider on Weapons Count."

176. Inspector's Copy of December 15, 1913, Building Repair Permit for 625 West Jackson. City of Chicago—Department of Buildings. I am grateful to Craig Tews of the Thomas More Society for his research into the history of 625 West Jackson Boulevard.

177. Berkeley F. Moyland, Jr., citing Berkeley F. Moyland, Sr. Author's interview with Berkeley F. Moyland, Jr., January 2, 2005.

178. Moyland interview.

179. Ibid.

180. Special Agent Francis F. Uteg, United States Secret Service Report on Thomas Arthur Vallee, June 23, 1966, re Lieutenant Berkeley Moyland's description of Vallee. JFK Record Number 180-10080-10131.

181. Moyland interview.

182. Uteg Report.

183. Moyland interview.

184. Ibid.

185. Ibid.

186. *FRUS, 1961-1963*, vol. IV, p. 513.

187. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, p. 163; with reference to Church Committee, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 222. Conein said the CIA money he brought with him was also for "death benefits to the families of those [rebel soldiers] killed in the coup." Ibid.

188. *FRUS, 1961-1963*, vol. IV, p. 487.

189. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, p. 163.

190. Hammer, *Death in November*, pp. 284-85. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, p. 163. Zalin Grant, *Facing the Phoenix* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), p. 209.

191. Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 263.

192. Ibid.

193. Don, *Our Endless War*, p. 107.

194. Hammer, *Death in November*, pp. 292-93; Don, *Our Endless War*, p. 107.

195. John Michael ("Mike") Dunn was interviewed by Zalin Grant on November 6, 1986, for Grant's book, *Facing the Phoenix*. Henry Cabot Lodge died on February 27, 1985.

196. Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*, p. 211.

197. Ibid.

198. Zalin Grant interview of Lucien Conein, September 24, 1986, in *Facing the Phoenix*. Although Don suspected earlier that Diem had escaped, the generals thought he must have remained in the palace, after all, because he was still talking with them on the telephone. The coup leaders had cut most of the phone lines in the Saigon area, but left open a palace line to negotiate Diem's surrender. Unknown to them, in preparation for such an emergency, Diem had run a secret phone line from the palace switchboard to the

house of his friend in Cholon. On Saturday morning when the generals thought they were talking to Diem cornered in the palace, he was actually speaking from his hiding place in Cholon. Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*, p. 212. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, p. 171.

General Don has claimed that Diem in effect then made his and Nhu's murders easy by disclosing their location in Cholon to the generals and inviting them to pick them up. Don, *Our Endless War*, p. 108. After interviewing both Dunn and Conein, journalist Zalin Grant suggested another possibility. In describing Diem's final call to Lodge, Dunn said Lodge "put the phone down and went to check on something," an odd response to a man's appeal for his life. Grant pointed out that Lodge's leaving the line at such a moment "would have given him time to get in touch with Lou Conein," to pass on a location that Diem may have given to Lodge for a ride to the airport but not to the generals. Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*, p. 213. Grant's hypothesis is "that Lodge gave Diem up that morning" to Conein, and (through him) to the generals. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

199. Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*, p. 211.

200. Hammer, *Death in November*, p. 298.

201. Brigadier General Nguyen Khanh characterized Captain Nguyen Van Nhung as a professional assassin in an interview with William J. Rust on April 12, 1982. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, p. 172. When Khanh carried out his own coup d'état in January 1964, he arrested Captain Nhung for resisting it. Don, *Our Endless War*, p. 112. Khanh then investigated Diem's and Nhu's assassinations. He said Nhung was responsible. But Nhung "did not live long enough to reveal on whose orders he was acting" and was soon "found dead in his jail cell, apparently a suicide victim by hanging." Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, p. 172. According to the other alleged assassin, Major Nghia, "the fate of President Diem was decided by the majority of the members of the Revolutionary Committee." *Ibid.*, p. 173.

202. Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, p. 218.

203. Hammer, *Death in November*, p. 298; Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam*, p. 172.

204. *FRUS, 1961-1963*, vol. IV, p. 559.

205. Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, p. 219.

206. Don, *Our Endless War*, p. 112.

207. *FRUS, 1961-1963*, vol. IV, p. 533. Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 301.

208. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 301.

209. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 997.

210. *FRUS, 1961-1963*, vol. IV, p. 517.

211. Herbert S. Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Dial Press, 1983), pp. 334-35.

212. Tom Wicker, John W. Finney, Max Frankel, E. W. Kenworthy, "C.I.A.: Maker of Policy, or Tool?" *New York Times* (April 25, 1966), p. 20.

213. Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (New York: Verso, 2001). De Witte cites CIA head Allen Dulles's August 26, 1960, letter concluding that Lumumba's "removal must be an urgent and prime objective and that under existing conditions this should be a high priority of our covert action." *Ibid.*, p. 17. Richard Bissell, then head of the CIA's covert action, said, "The Agency had put a top priority, probably, on a range of different methods of getting rid of Lumumba in the sense of either destroying him physically, incapacitating him, or eliminating his political influence." *Ibid.* As De Witte shows, it was the Belgian government that actually carried out Lumumba's assassination on January 17, 1961, three days before Kennedy became president.

214. Madeleine G. Kalb, *The Congo Cables: The Cold War in Africa—from Eisenhower to Kennedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), p. 196.

215. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, pp. 553-54.

216. *Ibid.*, p. 554.

217. *Ibid.*