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## MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

**SUBJECT:** Presidential Meeting on Vietnam,  
10 September 1963

**PARTICIPANTS:** The President

The Attorney General

**State:** Secretary Rusk  
Under Secretary Harriman  
Assistant Secretary Hilsman  
Ambassador Nolting  
Mr. Mendenhall

**Defense:** Secretary McNamara  
Under Secretary Gilpatric  
General Krulak

**USIA:** Mr. Murrow  
Mr. Mecklin

**AID:** Mr. Bell  
Mr. Phillips

**White House:** Mr. Bundy  
Mr. Forrestal  
Mr. Smith

**CIA:** Mr. McCone  
Mr. Colby

1. The meeting opened with a briefing by General Krulak of his conclusions from his weekend visit to Vietnam. He stated that he had talked to eighty-seven U. S. advisors and some Vietnamese. His conclusions were that the war is going ahead at an impressive pace

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although there is a lot remaining to fight, especially in the Delta. He said that Vietnamese officers are aware of the Buddhist political-religious problem but are essentially detached from it and that there is no effect in terms of religious division within the military units. He stated that the army leadership is essentially obedient despite some dissatisfaction in the middle and upper ranks with Nhu, whose departure would be hailed. There is no significant change in US/ARVN relationships. He concluded that the Viet Cong war will be won if current U. S. military and sociological programs are continued, "despite the wretched regime", and that ARVN will not take steps necessary to change the regime. He limited his comments to the situation in Vietnam and excluded international and U. S. domestic implications.

2. Mr. Mendenhall then gave the results of his visit commenting that there was a complete breakdown of the Saigon civilian government, that the ministers are inactive and fearful and have few U. S. official contacts. There is an atmosphere of fear and hatred in Saigon of Nhu, to a greater degree than there was of the Viet Cong at the time of the Taylor Mission in 1961. He stated that this had gone to the degree of convincing many GVN officials that the Viet Cong war was secondary to the danger posed by the regime itself. Dean Thuc commented on the possibility of an explosion of a religious war between the Buddhists and the Catholics. Most of this is aimed at Nhu but there is some identification of Diem with Nhu among the students. Mr. Mendenhall also visited Hue, Danang and Nha Trang and commented that they had the same atmosphere of fear and hatred. He stated that the security situation had deteriorated badly in the Northern Provinces of Quang Nam and Quang Tin and that in Thua Thien the people were turning toward the Viet Cong because of the repression of Buddhism. He summarized that Nhu must go or we cannot win the war as the people are turning to the Viet Cong in preference, adding that DCM Trueheart and Consul Helble in Hue concur with this.

3. The President asked whether the two gentlemen had visited the same country and why there was such a difference in their appraisal. General Krulak commented that the difference was one of the metropolitan against the national picture. He took issue with the statement that there was a deterioration of security in the Northern Provinces. Ambassador Nolting commented that Mr. Mendenhall had advised him of the same atmosphere of fear and hate when he arrived in 1961. Ambassador Nolting

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agreed that there is more now but commented that the atmosphere of 1961 had been reduced because of the success in developing the government's strength.

4. Mr. Rufus Phillips then commented on his personal associations with Vietnamese and President Diem and his initial favorable outlook toward victory with Diem. He stated, however, that Nhu had completely turned away the confidence and respect of the officers and civil servants who would not support the GVN if they had an alternative. He stated that there is a crisis of confidence in the U. S. as it has supported the GVN and that Vietnamese are looking for American leadership as any Vietnamese individuals who stand up are eliminated by Nhu. Despite this, he said there are Vietnamese with the courage to move. He recommended that the U. S. initiate a regular campaign under General Lansdale (stating that Ambassador Lodge had approved this recommendation) with the objectives of isolating the Nhus and building the strength of opposition elements, with the hope, however, of keeping Diem. He commented that General Krulak's comments were limited as American military advisors are barred from discussing politics. The President asked what specific actions he would recommend and he suggested: (a) cutting aid to Colonel Tung which would be viewed by the Generals with much enthusiasm and as an indication of a vigorous American position, (b) ensuring that the motion picture center produces no more films praising the Nhus, (c) insisting that any new aid agreements contain a clause that they must not be used to repress the Buddhists or support the Nhus and (d) covert actions such as character assassinations of Dinh, Tung, etc. These would be aimed at splitting Nhu from Diem. The President asked whether the GVN would not fight such a campaign by pulling back on the Viet Cong war in order to put pressure on us to resume aid. Mr. Phillips replied that the Army would not permit this and that the U. S. could support the Provinces directly. Mr. Phillips stated that the war was still progressing in I, II, III Corps but that in IV Corps very substantial setbacks have occurred in recent weeks. He said sixty per cent of the strategic hamlets in Long An Province have been destroyed, although this has not been connected with the political situation. General Krulak commented that his military advisors are merely reporting whether the war is being won, not politics or palace intrigue, and that they say the war is going well. In the IV Corps it is a tough situation but ARVN is bringing more strength to bear in this area. (5)

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5. Secretary Rusk commented that Brigadier Thompson had suggested that the Viet Cong might be moving against the cities as distinct from the country. Mr. Phillips replied in the negative and said there are large Viet Cong forces in the Delta. He emphasized that this is not a military war but a war for mens' minds and that if these are lost the war will be lost.

6. Mr. Mecklin indicated that he concurred with Mr. Phillips and particularly commented that the U. S. image is in deep trouble with politically conscious Vietnamese. He stated that the military effort will inevitably be affected. He stated, however, that Mr. Phillips' program would be not enough and that we must be willing to go the whole way as the family would not yield to aid cuts. Since a complete cut of aid would create a chaotic situation, Mr. Mecklin stated that the U. S. must make the decision that it is prepared to use U. S. forces to move in back of a complete break with the entire government as we do not know what we will get in such a situation and may need U. S. forces to retain some order.

7. Secretary Rusk stated that these differing opinions should be digested and recommendations prepared for the President. He suggested that the focus should be on what happened in July and August which reversed the optimistic judgments in May and June. He identified Nhu as the key to this and also said that Ambassador Lodge is having a difficult time talking to Diem. Governor Harriman commented that Mr. Jordan had predicted that the regime would face real trouble as early as March. Mr. McCone pointed out the National Estimate in May, which indicated that we could win, followed by a Special Estimate on 10 July stating that GVN relations with its public and the U. S. are deteriorating and that victory is doubtful if not impossible. The DCI then talked from a personal telegram he had received from Mr. Richardson which took a less pessimistic view of the situation, expressed the belief that the regime and the army will be able to get together and recommended against any cut in aid.

8. The President expressed appreciation for these reports and their directness. He requested the following actions: (a) A program be prepared for him by State in coordination with AID, DOD and CIA for phased cuts in aid which could be imposed. (b) He emphasized the necessity that different agencies not express differing views on the situation, quoting various press stories to this effect. He stated that it is necessary

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to bring our government together to speak as one government. (c) He requested consideration of appropriate Congressional action which should be sought. He understood that Senator Church was amenable to discussion and he did not wish to be tied down by a firm Congressional position unless we needed it. (d) He requested that a message be prepared to ask President Diem to silence Madame Nhu while she is in the U. S.



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Chief, Far East Division

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