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Chapter 13

Meeting President Kennedy

About 9: 45 on September 10, Hilsman and I walked over to the White House and got to the cabinet room about 10: 15. Forrestal was already there; he advised me to speak only if requested. Others began filing in. I recognized Dean Rusk, Secretary McNamara, and Gen. Maxwell Taylor, all of whom took a seat on one side of the long table that dominated the room. McNamara and Rusk left open a seat between them that I assumed was for the president. Just behind the president's chair was McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security advisor. Also there were Director Bell from AID, Edward R. Murrow from USIA, and John McCone, Director of Central Intelligence. I was seated in the back row of chairs, away from the table, along with John Mecklin. Hilsman and Forrestal were in front of us, while Krulak and Mendenhall were seated at the table across from McNamara and Rusk. Robert Kennedy did not arrive at all. Promptly at 10: 30 President Kennedy walked in, flashed a smile, and sat down. It was my first chance to see him up close. He exuded self-confidence and charisma as he nodded at Krulak and said, "Please proceed."

Krulak spoke first, explaining with an air of optimism that he had visited all four of the corps regions, meeting American military advisors in each, as well as lower-ranking officers and noncoms on advisory teams. In each corps area, a representative group had been assembled for him to interview, some eighty-seven Americans in all. He claimed to have also talked to twenty-seven Vietnamese officers, as well as to General Harkins and his staff. He had found that the shooting war was still going ahead at an impressive pace. It had been adversely affected by the crisis, but the impact was not great. Most Vietnamese officers viewed the Buddhist issue with detachment. There was some dissatisfaction among the officers, but it was focused more on Nhu than on Diem. Nhu's departure would be hailed, but few would extend their necks to bring it about. **The war against the VC would be won if current American programs were pursued, whatever the defects of the regime.**

All this was presented with an air of absolute certainty. None of it reflected the actual situation in the Delta. Krulak seemed utterly convinced he had accurately divined the thinking of the Vietnamese officers he had talked to, not realizing that they would never reveal their true thoughts to a high-ranking American whom they did not know personally, certainly never openly in front of other Vietnamese officers.

Then Mendenhall spoke. He had been to Hue and Danang, as well as Saigon, and had spoken to Vietnamese whom he had known before, both in and outside the government. In Saigon he had found a **virtual breakdown in civil government and a pervasive atmosphere of hate.** "The war against the Viet Cong had become secondary to the war against the regime," he said. He had found a similar atmosphere of hate in Hue and Danang. The Viet Cong had made recent

advances in two provinces in the center, where Buddhist agitation had extended into the countryside, and there were reports of villagers in one province opting for the VC. Students in Hue and Saigon were talking about the VC as an alternative to the regime. His conclusion was that the war against the VC could not be won if Nhu remained in Vietnam. (I thought I heard him say Diem too, not just Nhu.) The picture painted by Mendenhall was dire in the extreme. South Vietnam was literally falling apart.

“The two of you did visit the same country, didn’t you?” President Kennedy asked, so different were the two presentations. This provoked a laugh and then a stunned silence. Neither had it right. Mendenhall had painted an exaggerated picture of imminent collapse. Krulak was equally as far off the mark. When no one commented, Hilsman spoke up, saying this was the difference between a military and a political point of view. Krulak suggested that the difference was that Mendenhall was reporting on urban attitudes, while he himself was reporting on “national attitudes.” The clear implication was that in going to the countryside, he, Krulak, had gone where the real war was, while Mendenhall had only visited the cities. Nolting pitched in, reminding Mendenhall that in 1961 he had made the same prediction of government paralysis and consequent defeat by the Viet Cong, which had not happened. McGeorge Bundy pointed out dryly that in 1961 we had overcome paralysis by strengthening the government’s effort against the Viet Cong; how could we strengthen a government that was causing its own paralysis?

Neither Krulak or Mendenhall had communicated the complexities of South Vietnam. Nor had they captured the nature of the insurgency— mainly a political struggle for the loyalty and support of the rural population. This was the other war, the real war. I was particularly upset at Krulak’s report because I had just been in Long An Province, in the Delta. To generate the will to resist the Viet Cong and to win the population’s support, the hamlets had to provide security as well as improve the population’s well-being. Most hamlets could defend themselves against local Viet Cong squad- and platoon-sized attacks, but not against main-force assaults. That was the Vietnamese army’s job, and it was not being done, particularly in most of the Delta, and certainly not in Long An. Tangible improvements in schools, wells, and crops were happening, but these alone were not enough.

Politically, I understood the thinking of many key Vietnamese who were not “palace intriguers” but Diem supporters who had become disillusioned over Nhu. Because of Lodge, and at his request, I had become involved with the coup conspirators and given them assurances of American support. What I knew, however, of Vietnam had convinced me that though Nhu had to go, Diem had to be saved. It was still possible, but this seemed the last chance.

Suddenly, I heard Forrestal’s voice: “Mr. President, we have with us Rufus Phillips, who is in charge of the Rural Affairs program in South Vietnam, as you know. I think you ought to hear his views.” Kennedy nodded, “Yes, by all means.” I was ushered to a chair at the table, and Kennedy gave me a warm smile, which encouraged me. Whirling through my mind were two thoughts: “I owe him the truth as I see it,” and a question—“ How can I tell him what I know about South Vietnam in a few minutes?” “Mr. President,” I began, “I have known South Vietnam since 1954 and have close personal relationships with many Vietnamese in and out of the government and know President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. The problem is Nhu. He has lost the respect of the majority of the civilian and military leadership, who would change the government if they saw an alternative. The opinions of the Buddhist leadership, which are violently anti-Diem, are not representative, but there is a general crisis of confidence in the

regime, shared by civilian and army leaders alike.” At this point, McNamara started shaking his head sideways, a gesture he continued throughout my presentation.

I went on to say that our own military advisors were not an accurate source of political information. They were under a directive not to talk politics with their Vietnamese counterparts, and the Vietnamese knew it. It was only with old American friends that they would discuss such matters. General Krulak interjected at this point that the advisors were not good on politics or palace intrigue, but were good on whether the war was being won or not, and they said the war was going well.

I continued, “I have spoken with many Vietnamese political and military leaders, such as Secretary of Defense Nguyen Dinh Thuan, President Diem’s secretary, Vo Van Hai, General Le Van Kim of the General Staff, and Colonel Hoang Van Lac, who heads the Strategic Hamlet Program. Thuan, the most powerful man in the Diem government after Diem and Nhu, thinks Nhu must leave the country or there will be chaos. He says security is deteriorating; the government is now losing the war in the Delta. Most Vietnamese would like to see Diem remain, but they are unalterably opposed to the Nhus. Thuan feels America must act to show it does not support Nhu. We cannot continue to ignore Nhu’s actions at the cost of losing Vietnamese respect and support.”

The president said he recalled making a number of public statements condemning Vietnamese government actions. I said we had criticized the government before, but what the Vietnamese were looking for was concrete action illustrating the U.S. position. “What is needed,” I stated, “is a campaign to isolate Nhu and get him out of the country. The campaign needs a campaign manager. Most Vietnamese would like to see Diem remain but are unalterably opposed to the Nhus. We cannot win the war if the Nhus remain. This is the opinion of Secretary Thuan, Colonel Lac, head of the Strategic Hamlet Program, and many others. We need a person to guide and direct a program to isolate the Nhus and to convince the government and the people that the U.S. will not support a government with Nhu in it. That man is General Lansdale. Ambassador Lodge agrees that Lansdale should come back. If it doesn’t work, no one would be more qualified to help put together a new government. I recommend you send him there as soon as possible.” The president took notes while I spoke. When I finished, he said, “Mr. Phillips, I want to thank you for your remarks, particularly for your recommendation concerning General Lansdale.” He indicated I should remain at the table.

The president then asked for my specific recommendations for dealing with Nhu. I suggested we cut off CIA aid to Colonel Tung’s Special Forces, which had raided the pagodas, and that USIS stop producing films laudatory of Nhu. We should make it clear that Nhu was the target of our actions. This would isolate him and produce a psychological squeeze for his removal. President Kennedy asked, “What about the possibility that Nhu’s response would be to withdraw funds from the war and the field to Saigon, charging that the U.S. was causing them to lose the war?” I said the army would not stand for this. “If worse came to worse, we could take our piasters out to the provinces in suitcases. We started supporting the Strategic Hamlet Program that way; we could finish it that way.”

“What do you think of the military situation?” the president asked. “I am sorry to have to tell you, Mr. President,” I replied, “but we are not winning the war, particularly in the Delta. The first, second, and third corps areas are okay, but the war effort in the fourth corps, the Delta area south of Saigon, is beginning to go to pieces. I was just in Long An Province, where within the

past few weeks the Viet Cong destroyed sixty strategic hamlets, forcing the inhabitants to cut the barbed-wire defenses and take the roofs off their houses. ARVN troops, who were supposed to be defending the hamlets, were confined to quarters for fear they might be used for a coup.” Hilsman asked if security had started deteriorating in the Delta before August 20 (the cataclysmic day of the raid on the Buddhist pagodas). I said it had.

Krulak interjected, “Mr. Phillips is putting his views over those of General Harkins, and as between Mr. Phillips and General Harkins, I would take General Harkins’s assessment. The fourth corps is the most difficult, but we hope to drive the Viet Cong into this area to compress them so they can be destroyed. The war is not being lost militarily.” My God, I thought to myself, Krulak must have gone to the moon— but the moment was too serious to laugh at the absurdity of a Viet Cong “human cattle drive” into the Delta!

Secretary Rusk asked if I could explain the totally different stories coming from my last meeting with Secretary Thuan and Harkins’ meeting with Thuan the following day. I said Thuan had been frank with me, because we were friends, but he didn’t know General Harkins personally and would say what he thought the general wanted to hear. Rusk then asked what I thought of Colonel Thompson’s (the British senior advisor in Saigon) idea that the Viet Cong might be turning to the cities. I said I didn’t think so— there was too much activity in the Delta. “The strategic hamlets are not being adequately protected, they are being overrun. Furthermore, this is not a military, but a political war. It is a war for men’s minds more than a war against the Viet Cong, and it’s being lost.”

John Mecklin, the USIS director in Saigon, spoke next. He said he shared my views and the recommendation about Lansdale, though he felt I hadn’t gone far enough. He thought we should directly deploy American forces in South Vietnam to support the war effort. At this point the meeting broke into an uproar, General Taylor vehemently saying, “No, no, under no circumstances!” I was stunned by Mecklin’s proposal. I could not figure out where he got the idea. It diverted attention from the real problem, which was dealing realistically with the Nhus. McCone, in his turn, argued the Vietnamese military could work with Nhu and that the situation was not as ominous as reported. Harriman said the situation was obviously coming apart and that we could not continue with Diem.

There was no consensus. The complete split in the Kennedy administration and some of the anger and bitterness it was provoking was patently clear. The president said he was disturbed at the tendency in both Washington and Saigon to fight our internal battles in the newspapers. He quoted some recent stories reflecting the differences between the State and Defense departments; he wanted such disputes fought out at this table, not indirectly. He asked the group to meet again the next day. As I left the meeting, the director of AID, David Bell, put his arm around my shoulders and said, “Thanks for telling it as you see it.”

Outside the White House, it had begun to rain. I slipped on the pavement and cut a deep gash in my shin but didn’t feel it— I was numb. The sharp divisions, bureaucratic rivalries, and towering egos of the top officials in that room had stunned me. They all seemed so sure of themselves. The president was the only one who seemed genuinely interested in what was really going on in Vietnam. Despite the confusion and lack of understanding, however, I was encouraged. I had seen Krulak’s ignorance as well as Mendenhall’s narrowly focused views masquerading as fact, but Kennedy had taken notes only when I had spoken. Maybe he would cut through the bureaucracy and act decisively despite McNamara’s clear opposition to what I

had said. At the same time, I would have preferred to make a more direct pitch about the need to save Diem, and for Lansdale as the means, but I thought my approach had been the only way of finessing Lodge's apparent conflation of Diem with Nhu, an error I now knew was clearly shared by Hilsman and Harriman. This might be a turning point. My mind was in turmoil as I returned to my parents' apartment.