

Memo

(Situation in South Vietnam) untitled

23 April 1955

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The thrust of General Collins' remarks given in two two-hour sessions* in the State Department can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Diem stinks.
2. The situation in South Vietnam is entirely ascribable to Diem's failures. Kly and the French can in no sense be held responsible for it.
3. If chaos is to be averted, Diem must go.
4. A successor government, either one established along lines of the Collins-Thoi pattern or along the lines of the Bao Dai plan, should be established.
5. Diem would be powerless to offer the successor government notable difficulties.
6. The successor government would work.

The rest of this memorandum consists of two parts: the first an elaboration of the outline above, and the second some examples of discrepancies in General Collins' testimony as it was spun out in the two parts.

WENDELL KENT
Assistant Director
National Estimates

* Present: Murphy, Collins, Starn, Duan, Hoey, Armstrong, Galloway, Barbour, Sebald, Young, Stelle, Bowie, McArdle, Tyler, MacArthur, Howe (in p.m.), Reinhart, Wiener, Kent, [redacted], Kattenberg, and two unidentified army officers from the Pentagon.

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PART I

1. Diem stinks. Aside from his personality, upon which General Collins did not comment, there is no good that can be said of Diem as a chief of government and administrator. He has no sense of the task ahead, no vestige of administrative ability. He shuts his eyes to problems that confront him, refuses to make appointments that cry to be made. (His unwillingness to appoint a minister of the interior is peculiarly galling to Collins.) He goes over the heads of his own officials without consulting them. (He has ordered VNA forces without consulting his minister of defense or his chief of staff.) He cannot get along with people of ability and insists on having about him only like-minded men. Collins stated that in the five months of his acquaintance he knows of no single original constructive idea which has emanated from Diem. Collins does not see the situation quite as imminently black as Ely, but he is entirely despairing of any solution so long as Diem stays in office.

2. The situation in South Vietnam is entirely ascribable to Diem's failures. Diem's role has been primarily a role of inaction. When he has taken action or threatened to take action, it is the wrong thing. Witness his show-down with By Vien on the question of the "Grand Monde". This pleasure dome was precipitately shut down two weeks before the local New Year's celebrations, thus disappointing many persons and causing By Vien to lose face. According to Collins there were many other and wiser methods by which the same result could have been achieved. Witness a plan-less plan to assault frontally the Binh Xuyen-controlled police headquarters in Saigon at 1:30 in the afternoon when one side and the rear of this building were protected and the front and other side guarded by a dozen strong points defended by machine gunners. Witness his refusal to appoint a minister of the interior as a first step towards establishing some sort of security body. Witness his rowing with every intelligent member of his cabinet and evoking their resignations. This kind of man and this kind of action account for the present situation.

Ely is completely honest. He has contributed nothing to the deterioration of the situation. As to his switch from optimism to pessimism after his last trip to Paris, his pessimistic view emerged from his realization that the situation was further deteriorating and not from instructions from the French Government.

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3. If chaos is to be averted, Diem must go. In the light of the above this would seem to need no elaboration. However, it is noteworthy that Collins feels that Diem is incapable himself of even taking those elementary actions which would result in the election of a provisional assembly. Diem has spoken of his willingness to have such elections and to abide by the decisions of such a provisional assembly, even if one decision were to oust Diem as chief of government. Collins gives the impression that Diem is so stuck on high center that he cannot make decisions even in directions which are acceptable to him. Meanwhile, the continuance of the Diem regime makes civil war almost inevitable. Collins has not set a time of probable outbreak but feels it could be started at any time. Who will kick it off? His answer is either party may kick it off. The sects are increasingly restive, and the public now feel that the Binh Xuyen control of the police function is intolerable. The march of events is simply at a point where something must be done.

4. A successor government, either one established along lines of the Collins-Thoad pattern or along the lines of the Bao Dai plan, should be established. Of the Bao Dai plan, General Collins noted that next to his own it was the most acceptable solution he had heard of. He also, under questioning, agreed that the plan was almost certainly French-inspired. The fact that the Bao Dai plan provided for "a high council", the matter of a meeting in Cannes, the prospective role of Quat - all point to French influence. General Collins felt that the Bao Dai plan was in fact the French Foreign Office's answer to the Department's pointed questions of a week or so ago. On the question of what form of government would best suit South Vietnam, General Collins was vehement in his assertion that a republic was out of the question. The only form of government possible would have to be a constitutional monarchy. His attention was called to the role of Bao Dai. Should Bao Dai return to Vietnam now? No, he said, he should not. Should he ever return? Yes, under the proper situation, and he should come back with his own wife, not somebody else's. He should live in the palace. He should give up running around. He should assume responsibility for the government. General Collins did not describe the correct situation, nor did he give an estimate of the likelihood of these particular reforms occurring in Bao Dai's way of life. While General Collins did say that Quat had no great following, at no time did he develop the difficulties which Quat might encounter as a chief of government. My own guess is that in the light of his remarks about "no organized public opinion in Vietnam" he does not feel that a popular following is important to a Vietnamese government at this stage of the game.

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5. Wien would be powerless to offer the necessary government political difficulties. Collins seems to feel that Dien has no popular following except possibly in the northern province of his origin. Yes, he and his brothers might make some trouble there. Yes, Wien might issue a white paper condemning the French and the US. Yes, he would give fuel to the Communists, but no matter what is done the Communists will find fuel. Dien is no public speaker and would probably retire to a monastery after an initial flare-up.

6. The necessary government would work because:

- a. There are competent men available for cabinet spots, i.e., Quat, Do, Phuh, Thout, et al, and have all that is required of a following;
- b. The sects can be brought into line and their private armies integrated into the Vietnamese Army. General Collins noted that Dr. Wien had an inclination to be some respectable and in Collins' view would give up the police concession if urged by Bao Dal. The present plan for the disarming of the sect soldiers and the integration of 19,700 of them into the VNA has prospects of success. Quatlet believes that the sects will accept it. Collins made no estimate but did not seem pessimistic;
- c. If this plan could be put into effect and the plan for the branding of the new VNA implemented, in about a year the VNA will be able to maintain internal order. Until such time as the VNA assumes this function, the IG0 and the PVO are the essential organs preserving internal order.

Herewith some short comments peripheral to Collins' general thesis. The French would probably be willing to see an indefinite partition of the country. The French almost certainly continue to think of South Vietnam in colonial terms. Rly from the beginning has consistently opposed any solution to the South Vietnam situation that would make the chief of government a French stooge. Indeed, he has been insistent that the leader cannot be a colonialist.