

Conversation: Meeting Tape 107/A42.4

Date: 1963-08-26

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Roger Hilsman Jr.

Start Time: 12:00

Place: Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: "They're Just Not Right Very Often"

SCENE SETTER: Following the imposition of martial law in South Vietnam and the arrival of Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. as the new U.S. ambassador in Saigon, President Kennedy critiqued the American press in Vietnam. He did so after the State Department informed Lodge that the United States might need to withdraw its support for South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm. This exchange with Roger Hilsman Jr. was part of the first high-level meeting JFK had following the dispatch of that message.

President Kennedy: I'll tell you one—as I said yesterday to Roger [Hilsman Jr.], David Halberstam's stuff out there reminds me very much of the stuff [Herbert L.] Matthews was writing about [Fidel] Castro. I'm sure—I'm not saying there's an analogy, but [*unclear*] he's running a most political campaign. Every sentence there is an effort that causes us to do something. So I always want to be sure we're doing it not because—

Roger Hilsman Jr.: Not because—

President Kennedy: He's 28 years of age, he's—

Hilsman: [*Unclear*] been wrong on almost every count.

President Kennedy: Well, that whole press out there said two years ago that they were going to collapse. So I just want to be sure that we're all acting with—that's why I'm glad that [Harry D. "Don"] Felt feels that way and [Paul D.] Harkins. 'Cause I just feel that's *just* what the [*New York Times*] did in the case of [*unclear*].

Hilsman: Now, Halberstam—

President Kennedy: As you said, he's been wrong.

Hilsman: He's been wrong. He's been wrong—

President Kennedy: [*Unclear.*] And *Newsweek* was wrong. If you go back over what they were writing in '61, the thing was going to collapse in three months. And now I get that memorandum the other day, which showed that if we hadn't had for this disaster, we were really on the upswing.

Hilsman: We were—

President Kennedy: I just . . . I know Halberstam. He's a very bright young fellow who's 28 years old and hasn't any experience. We don't want to have him writing our policy.

End of excerpt 1.

President Kennedy: [*speaking over W. Averell Harriman*] Well, I'm just saying that the fact of the matter is that [Ngô Đình] Diệm and his brother [Ngô Đình Nhu], with all of their defects, have [*Hilsman acknowledges*] [*unclear*] at least there's a situation there, which permits the—Harkins, based on his report to us a week ago, to feel that this thing is really moving to a positive, successful conclusion. So when we move to eliminate the government, we want to be sure we're not doing it just because—

Hilsman: We're not, sir.

President Kennedy: —the *New York Times* is excited about it.

Hilsman: We're not, sir.

President Kennedy: I don't know. I mean, they're just not right very often.

Hilsman: No, sir. They've been wrong in this situation continuously.

End of excerpt 2.

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