

Conversation: Meeting Tapes 107/A42.5b and 108/A43.1

Date: 1963-08-28

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Robert S. McNamara

Participant: McGeorge Bundy

Participant: Maxwell D. Taylor

Start Time: 12:10

Place: Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: "I Don't Think We Do Have to Do It"

SCENE SETTER: With CIA sources in Saigon reporting that the situation there had reached a "point of no return," President Kennedy and senior aides discussed their support of a coup to oust South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm. In this excerpt, Kennedy sought to gauge its prospects for success and, depending on its viability, preserve Washington's freedom of action.

Robert S. "Bob" McNamara: I must say I'm reluctant to see us follow this course of action, but it seems to me that the events of the night have forced us onto it. And if we're going to proceed, as we're now being pushed, then I think our objective ought to be to win. And it isn't at all clear to me that we're going to win proceeding as we are. I say that for the reason that the forces in the cables that came in this morning indicate that there's at least a possibility, if not a probability, that [Ngô Đình] Diệm could overpower the generals, at least initially. If that be the case, I think there are some actions that we could take. At least we could query [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.] and [Paul D.] Harkins. If [*unclear*]

President Kennedy: Well, I thought the cable was to ask Lodge and Harkins if it was their judgment that we were—that this operation is necessary and would have a chance for—and there was a good possibility for success, if there was really—especially the coup in question. They'd come back and hopefully recommend that it is necessary. They seemed to feel that it's—how'd they—what'd they—did they—they said [*unclear*]?

McGeorge "Mac" Bundy: Well, [*unclear*] the question, Mr. President, that's been put to them was . . . uh . . .

President Kennedy: I don't think we ought to take the view here that this has gone beyond our control, because I think that'd be the worst reason to do it. I—

Bundy: "Highest authority asks whether you and Harkins, in light of developing situation, presently favor operation as currently planned by generals." And their answer is just as simple as this: "On basis of what we now know both General Harkins and I favor operation."

President Kennedy: I think we ought to not . . . I don't know if—where it's gone, but, I mean, I don't think these things are ever gone until they happen. And I think if we decided that it wasn't in the cards, then I think we could unload if those generals don't really probably have much stomach for it. So I think it—I don't think we ought to just do it because we feel we have to now do it. I think we ought to make it a [*unclear*] judgment today. 'Cause I don't think we do have to do it. At least I'd be prepared to take up the argument with them that, "Well, let's not do it." So I think we ought to try to make it without feeling that it's forced on us.

Maxwell D. "Max" Taylor: But I think—

Bundy: I think what we need to—well, another way of putting that, Mr. President, is: what we need to look at is the consequences of backing off as against the consequences of going ahead, and keep those two pictures in front of us as we go. But I think we do have to make a decision today as to whether, for example, we wish to give further encouragement to the generals, which is indicated if we want to increase the chances of success, and use whatever ways and means we may have of affecting some of the more doubtful commanders, because that also, I think, is clearly indicated if you want to make this succeed. I think there is a question equally of, if I were Lodge, I would feel very strongly the need to have discretionary authority to move very rapidly in situations as explosive as this. All of these things do rather commit us to the operation. So that in that sense, we reduce our freedom of action every time we act to make the thing succeed. I think that's what's eating Bob McNamara.

End of excerpt.

CITATION: "Meeting with National Security Officials on 28 August 1963," *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition [Kennedy and Vietnam]*, ed. Ken Hughes and Marc J. Selverstone] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/>