

## Conversation: Dictabelt 52.1

**Date:** 1963-11-04

**Participant:** John F. Kennedy

**Start Time:** Unknown

**Place:** Oval Office

SCROLLER TITLE: “The Coup in Saigon”

SCENE SETTER: Three days after learning of the assassinations of South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Nhu—and two days after learning that General Dương Văn “Big” Minh had personally ordered their murders—President Kennedy dictated a memorandum giving his version of events.

**President Kennedy:** Monday, November 4th, 1963. The—Over the weekend the coup in Saigon took place. Culminated three months of conversation about a coup—comma—conversation which divided the government here and in Saigon.

Opposed to a coup was General [Maxwell D. “Max”] Taylor, the Attorney General [Robert F. “Bobby” Kennedy], Secretary [Robert S. “Bob”] McNamara, to a somewhat lesser degree John [A.] McCone, partly because of an old hostility to [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.], which causes him to lack confidence in Lodge’s judgment—comma—partly to—as a result of a new hostility, because Lodge shifted his [CIA] station chief [John H. Richardson]—semicolon—in favor of the coup was State [Department], led by [W.] Averell Harriman, George [W.] Ball, Roger Hilsman [Jr.], supported by [Michael V.] Mike Forrestal at the White House. [*Pause.*]

I feel that we must bear a good deal of responsibility for it, beginning with our cable of early [*sic*] August in which we suggested the coup—period. In my judgment that wire was badly drafted—comma—it should never have been sent on a Saturday. I should not have given my consent to it without a roundtable conference in which McNamara and Taylor could have presented their views. While we did redress that balance in later wires, that first wire encouraged Lodge along a course to which he was in any case inclined. [Paul D.] Harkins continued to oppose the coup on the ground that the military effort was doing well. There was a sharp split [*a child exclaims in the background*] between Saigon and the rest of the country. Politically the situation was deteriorating. Militarily there had—it had not had its effect. [*A child exclaims in the background.*] There was a feeling, however, that it would. For this reason, Secretary McNamara and General Taylor supported applying additional pressures to [Ngô Đình] Diệm and [Ngô Đình] Nhu in order to move them. [*A child shrieks as Caroline B. Kennedy and John F. Kennedy Jr. enter the room.*]

*End of excerpt 1.*

**President Kennedy:** I was shocked by the death of Diệm and Nhu. I’d met Diệm with Justice [William O.] Douglas many years ago. He was an extraordinary character. While he became increasingly difficult in the last months, nevertheless over a ten-year period he’d held his country together, maintained its independence under very adverse conditions. The way he was killed made it particularly abhorrent.

The question now is whether the generals can stay together and build a stable government or whether Saigon will begin—will turn on—public opinion in Saigon, the intellectuals, students, et cetera, will turn on this government as repressive and undemocratic in the not-too-distant future—period.

*End of excerpt 2.*

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