

Conversation: Meeting Tape 119/A55.3

Date: 1963-11-02

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Roger Hilsman Jr.

Participant: McGeorge Bundy

Participant: Dean Rusk

Participant: Unidentified Speaker

Start Time: 16:30

Place: Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: “The Death of Diệm and Nhu”

SCENE SETTER: Less than 24 hours after the assassination of South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm and his brother Ngô Đình Nhu, President Kennedy queried senior U.S. officials about how the administration should discuss it publicly. Kennedy sought to describe it as “unfortunate” and expressed concern about its potential impact in Saigon and abroad.

President Kennedy: So I guess we’re all—thank you. [*Unclear exchange.*] What are we going to say about the death of [Ngô Đình] Diệm and [Ngô Đình] Nhu? We’re not going to say anything about . . .

Unidentified Speaker: Mr. President, the way I handled it this morning was to say that I was not in a position to—I went off the record on it, ’cause I don’t think [*an unidentified speaker attempts to interject*] there should be anything on the record—that was just that our reports were as varied as their reports were, and, therefore, we’re not in a position to do any—to really add to what they had.

President Kennedy: It would be helpful if that government, if it’s going to come out that it was assassination, if they could have some—if Big Minh [Dương Văn Minh] was not involved in the—in this situation [*unclear*] that he’s regarded as the author of it.

Roger Hilsman Jr.: It is indeed.

President Kennedy: If we were going to say anything about that, I would think it would be better to indicate our feeling that this is an unfortunate—I think we’ve already got an unfortunate event. Nonetheless, it’d be regrettable if it were ascribed—unless the evidence is clear—if it were ascribed to Big Minh or the responsible council of the generals. [*Unclear.*]

McGeorge “Mac” Bundy: I think—

President Kennedy: I don’t want it wrapped around him if he can help it. [*An unidentified speaker attempts to interject.*]

Hilsman: I think ours—what I’d recommend, sir, is that we wait a little while and see how it—how the—the information’s going to come out. And it’s going to come out in the next 48 hours, I think. And I think we can—

President Kennedy: His role may not be . . . as well [*unclear*].

Dean Rusk: The chances are that we’re going to have a lot of the pieces, sir. [*Unclear exchange.*]

Unidentified Speaker: If we seem to take a negative line with his account—

President Kennedy: [*speaking over someone else*] [*Unclear*] that I would think—I'm sure [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.] must be aware that this is an unfortunate—

Hilsman: I would think if—

President Kennedy: —event, and I suppose they're going to make every effort to disassociate Big Minh and [Lucien E. "Lou"] Conein [*unclear*]. [*Unclear*] we have to tell him that.

Hilsman: Certainly not at this stage, sir. Maybe the facts over the next couple days might indicate some action on our part, but I think we ought to hold it for tonight.

President Kennedy: Now, we've indicated our concern that this is an unfortunate event. I don't know whether Lodge thinks it is, but I think it is. And I don't know whether, in Saigon, maybe they don't think it is, but . . .

Rusk: Well, it's unfortunate that the safe exit arrangements did not work out. And that Diệm had a responsibility in that, too.

President Kennedy: Well, did he go to the Chi—[*someone coughs loudly*] [*unclear*] or not? That was— [*Unclear exchange.*]

Bundy: [*Unclear*] established. [*Unclear exchange.*]

Rusk: [*Unclear*] part of the deal.

Hilsman: We're not even certain, and Lodge is not certain, that there was, in fact, an agreement to surrender. If there was, in fact, an agreement for surrender, then Diệm bears some responsibility for it, because he didn't live up to his side. The only hard evidence we have that there might have been an agreement was that the presidential escort was drawn up to the palace to escort him out. [*Unclear*]

President Kennedy: I'd like to send a wire to Lodge expressing . . . maybe, Mac, [*Bundy acknowledges*] you can draft it, about our concern about—just so he knows that . . .

Bundy: [*speaking quietly*] He has a means of finding out more in Vietnam. [*Unclear exchange.*]

President Kennedy: Do you want to say, "We're concerned about the assassination and the effect it may have on the government internally—over the long run internally and externally. And that if there are any extenuating circumstances, they should develop [*unclear*], and if there was not responsibility at the top, that should be made clear." [*Pause.*]

Hilsman: In other words, get a story and stick to it.

President Kennedy: Well, it ought to be a true story, if possible. I think we ought to say, "If these are facts, they ought to be quite clear." [*Unclear.*] It would help if the government had a [*unclear*]. Could I see that wire when you [*unclear*]?

Hilsman: All right, sir. We'll do it right down in Mac's office. We'll do all these down there.

End of excerpt.

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