

Conversation: Meeting Tape 107/A42.4

Date: 1963-08-26

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Roger Hilsman Jr.

Participant: Dean Rusk

Start Time: 12:00

Place: Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: “It’s Pretty Horrible to Contemplate”

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, President Kennedy and senior advisers considered the impact of a coup attempt against South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm. Secretary of State Dean Rusk feared that Diem’s current policies, which most recently included raids on Buddhist pagodas and the declaration of martial law, had put the United States “on the road to disaster.”

President Kennedy: If we’re unsuccessful here and if these generals don’t do anything, then we have to deal with [Ngô Đình] Diệm as he is, and [Ngô Đình] Nhu as he is. Then the question [is] what do we do to protect our own prestige, and also we’d make—see if we can have this thing continue on successfully. [*Unclear.*] You have any thought about that?

Roger Hilsman Jr.: It’s pretty horrible to contemplate, sir. I thi[nk]—Nhu is basically anti-American. I—there’s the—an element of emotional instability here, I think. I think our position will be increasingly difficult. But also, and most important, is that everyone in the field, and here, too, agree with them, that what you will have in the wake of the desecration of the pagodas and everything is a drifting away of these key, cadre fellows in the army, and that the situation will *rapidly* worsen.

Dean Rusk: Mr. President, I think that the choice we have to make there is that unless there’s a major change in Diệm and Nhu’s approach to this whole internal problem, is to look at the fact that we’re on the road to disaster, and whether we’d rather take it by our choice, or be driven out by a complete deterioration of the situation in Vietnam, or move in such forces as would involve our taking over the country.

End of excerpt.

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