

Conversation: Meeting Tape 109.4

Date: 1963-09-10

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Joseph A. Mendenhall

Participant: Roger Hilsman Jr.

Participant: Victor H. Krulak

Participant: Rufus C. Phillips III

Participant: Dean Rusk

Start Time: 10:27

Place: Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: “You Both Went to the Same Country?”

SCENE SETTER: In the wake of the aborted coup against South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm, President Kennedy dispatched a fact-finding team to evaluate the state of the war and political climate in South Vietnam. Reports from the State Department’s Joseph A. Mendenhall and the Pentagon’s Major General Victor H. Krulak reached wildly different conclusions. Kennedy, in turn, asked aides to negotiate their disagreements in private rather than through the press.

Joseph A. “Joe” Mendenhall: Now, my conclusion is that . . . and this conclusion is shared, I might say, by Mr. [William C.] Trueheart, our deputy chief of mission, who is the American with political experience that’s been longer on the scene, I think, than anyone else. It’s also shared by our consul [John J. Helble] in Hué, that Mr. Nhu must go or that we will not be able to win the war in Vietnam if he stays. Now, Trueheart commented, at a meeting in the ambassador’s office, that he was very much afraid that the people were going to begin to move over toward the VC [Vietcong] if the alternative was only between Nhu and the Vietcong. I’d say I found that on the part of other U.S. civilian officials in central Vietnam. That is my conclusion as well, Mr. President.

President Kennedy: You both went to the same country?

Mendenhall: Yes, sir. [*Laughter.*]

Roger Hilsman Jr.: One talked to military and one to civilians.

President Kennedy: [*speaking over the group*] Well, I mean, how is it that we get such different—this is not a new thing; this is what we’ve been dealing with for three weeks. On the one hand, you’ve got the military saying the war is going better; on the other hand, you’ve got political strains or deteriorations affecting the military. Now, what—you two gentlemen are both—have a lot of experience. We’ve got a lot of confidence in both of you. What is the reason for the difference? You must have an explanation what the reasons for the difference [*unclear*]?

Victor H. Krulak: I’ll tell you a reason: it’s metropolitan versus national. That’s my judgment, sir. That Mr. Mendenhall has expressed a metropolitan viewpoint and I expressed one that reflects more of the countryside. Now, this is not to say that my viewpoint should prevail at all. But the city of Saigon is like the bullseye in a target, but there’s a great big target around it, too. The attitudes in Saigon, indeed, are different. They’re far more political, far less pragmatic, than are those in the countryside.

End of excerpt 1.

President Kennedy: How do you explain this report of the military—the war’s going well?

Rufus C. Phillips III: Well, sir, I explain it in the following fashion. It's still progressing in the First, Second, and Third Corps. I wish to dispute the General, however, on the Fourth Corps. It is *not* going well in the Fourth Corps.

Dean Rusk: What's that? The [Mekong] Delta?

Phillips: And I have the direct evidence to prove it, because I've just gone through the Fourth Corps.

Rusk: That's the south. [*Unclear*] down there—

Phillips: Right, sir. That is the Delta. [*Unclear exchange.*] The Strategic Hamlet Program is being chewed to pieces down there. In Long An province, which is just to the south of Saigon, where a concentrated effort was made in expanding the program, I would say that it was about 60 percent wiped out. We have districts there where 13 out of 15 hamlets were overrun and totally destroyed. We have some 50 kilometers of barbed wire which has been cut up into pieces. We have hamlet militia who have turned their weapons in for fear. And we have—

President Kennedy: How long has that been going on?

Phillips: This has been going on during July and August, sir.

End of excerpt 2.

President Kennedy: The other thing is, I think that we ought to try to discourage this government here—this is really the first time this has happened in . . . from . . . State [Department] putting out one line about “the Nhus must go,” the Pentagon putting out “this is the way to chaos.” There is this very strong difference of opinion. It's out in the Saigon area. It's reflected in a lot of the newspaper stories out of there—this story here . . . yesterday's [*New York Journal-American*]: “Gloom shrouds the Pentagon planners as they try to fight the shambles against the rugged war that was being won. And the military has every right to be angry with the Diêm government [*unclear*] the unbelievably inept American diplomacy and [*unclear*],” et cetera, et cetera. “The administration's clumsy intervention in the Vietnam hothouse.”

I know that there is some view of that in the Pentagon. There's also a view in the State Department that the military are wrong about the fate of the war, which, to me, it ought to be fought out here and not try to be fought out in the press, at least till we know a little more about it. Everybody can write about it afterwards, and who was right and wrong, but I think we ought to try to keep it concentrated here. So I think, in regard to getting rid of the Diêms and Nhus, it was unsuccessful for the last two weeks, now we've got another stage. If there's anybody who has any ideas, we want to hear them. There's no sense in just complaining about it [*unclear*] be passed to the—out to Saigon.

End of excerpt 3.

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