

Conversation: Meeting Tape 117/A53.4

Date: 1963-10-25

Participant: John F. Kennedy

Participant: Robert S. McNamara

Participant: McGeorge Bundy

Participant: Robert F. Kennedy

Start Time: 11:05

Place: Unspecified

SCROLLER TITLE: "Everybody'll Say We Did It"

SCENE SETTER: With a coup against South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm once again in the offing, President Kennedy and senior U.S. officials considered the virtues of supporting it. Among those questioning its wisdom was Attorney General Robert F. "Bobby" Kennedy, who thought Washington was discussing the coup with a lack of analytic rigor.

Robert S. "Bob" McNamara: Yes, Mr. President, there aren't many things we can do at the moment. I don't see how we can withdraw from the plan of pressure which we have undertaken. I don't believe it's necessary to withdraw from that at the present time. Neither of the two conditions that we considered as a basis for withdrawal, either the weakening of the economy or the weakening of the war effort or some movement of Diệm to us, has occurred. I think we can continue the present posture for a while, and I doubt very much we could withdraw from it easily at the present. I do think that we must recognize that coup planning will continue indefinitely no matter what we do, and we ought to take our association with it, in my opinion, out of the very amateurish hands that have been controlling it so far. And those hands—in particular, the ambassador and [Lucien E. "Lou"] Conein—I think Conein's reports have not been sound reports. He's reported a lot of gossip without proper evaluation and depended upon people back here to evaluate it. We're too far away from the scene to evaluate it properly. We need on hand in Saigon, or some other area close by, a thoroughly professional man to undertake the contacts and do so under a CAS [Controlled American Source] chief who is a highly responsible person—either, again, either in Saigon or outside, if John [A. McCone] wants him outside. And this is about the only thing it seems to me we can do properly—that is, to change the form of our contacts with the coup planners.

President Kennedy: Who are we going to have do it?

McGeorge "Mac" Bundy: Well, Mr. President, I really do think we've got—this is why I think it's happy that—

President Kennedy: Lodge.

Bundy: —Lodge is coming back, because what we've got to find is a man that really is regarded as highly professional by the agency professionals that also Lodge will take and use as his own. That man doesn't exist at the moment.

End of excerpt 1.

Robert F. "Bobby" Kennedy: Can I? The other question, really, is, if there are these discussions about these coups and this—evidently this fellow is planning one on November 2nd, I don't know whether they come off or not. But I would think that you'd really need some strong intelligence information regarding whether it's going to be effective or not. If it comes off and it's not effective, then obviously the United States is going to be blamed for it, particularly if some of these people are

caught and they talk about the conversations they had with the United States. We—I think that we have more of a stake in it than the fact that they just—there’s going to be a lot of talk about coups. The fact is that some of them make a real major effort to carry it out either effectively or not—if it’s not effective, then we’re to become involved, and if it is effective, where does it lead to? I would think an appraisal and an analysis of what we’re doing as far as coups would be worthwhile.

And now that somebody’s just running around talking to everybody who’s planning a coup, saying, “Well, the United States might be interested in that,” and giving them a little encouragement, and having the information, even the fact that you have the information and don’t report it to the government is an act of hostility. And the fact that you meet with these people, and they tell you they’re going to plan a coup, and you don’t do anything about it, I would think if they get caught, we’re in a good deal of trouble before the world. We’re a part. Even if we weren’t a part of it, or didn’t plan it, we look like—people won’t believe we didn’t do it. Everybody’ll say we did it, even though we didn’t. We’re going to still look awfully foolish. I would think that if we think that this government’s the government that’s going to do best to win the war, then we try to throw some cold water or something on coups until one really makes some sense. Or at least analyze them and find out if they’re going to go anyplace.

End of excerpt 2.

President Kennedy: Can’t we do this—I think there is a—we’ve got a lot of varieties of opinion about this matter at this table, let alone—everybody’s [*unclear*—I think [there’s] more or less unanimity that there’s some reservations about Lodge’s conduct since he’s there. But he’s there. We’re going to have to—we can’t fire him, so we’re going to have to give him directions when he comes back here.

So we ought to make sure that we’ve given as much thought as we can to how we’re going to handle Lodge to try to get him to do it the way we want him to do when he comes back. I think it’s particularly true of John McCone’s operation, which is the one that we’re most dissatisfied with. And we got to get him to end up with where we want him to go and not end up where he wants *us* to go.

End of excerpt 3.

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