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ITEM #5

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April 22, 1955

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Subject: South Vietnam - General Joe Collins' Comments

At a luncheon meeting today at the White House, General Collins made a report to the President on the current state of affairs in South Vietnam, in the presence of the following, who attended in addition to the President: Under Secretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr.; Under Secretary of Defense Robert Anderson; and Dillon Anderson.

General Collins said that the state of affairs in Saigon had reached the point where, in his opinion, the continuation of the present government under Diem was no longer supportable; that Diem had lost his Cabinet Ministers one by one and would lose two others as soon as the current phases of their activities were brought to a conclusion; that he had filled these vacancies by appointing himself to the places formerly occupied by the Cabinet Ministers, so that he was now his own Minister of Defense, and I believe Minister likewise of what corresponds to our Interior Department. At any rate - to give an example of his lack of administrative capability - he is presently signing personally all visas, for entry into and exit from the country; that he is completely intractable, unwilling to accept suggestions, and using such poor judgment, as General Collins sees it, in his efforts to maintain his government, that his government will inevitably fall.

General Collins mentioned the fact that Diem's two brothers were installed in the palace and were hovering over the leader, pulling and tugging all the time.

General Collins went on to describe a number of instances wherein Diem had been persuaded at only the last minute not to do some utterly foolish thing, particularly in reference to Collins' and Ely's recommendations to him as to how to handle or deal with the Binh Xuyen Sect, and this Sect's control of the National Security Police and certain installations in Saigon. He cited as an example the Diem plan at one time to attack the heavily armed police headquarters in the heart of Saigon at 1:30 in the afternoon with machine guns and guards, - when the streets were full of pedestrians and vehicles, and also when a school nearby was letting out for the day. Many other instances were cited by General Collins, but the net of it is that he feels now that this fellow is impossible, and the French share this view, as well. He sees no future for the government so long as it remains on the course that it is, under the leadership of Diem.

The President asked General Collins if he ascribed the deterioration in the stability of the Diem regime to the French undermining, and he said, to my surprise, no, he did not altogether. Collins went ahead to

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say he believed that there had been a bonafide effort on the part of the French to bring about some viability of the Diem regime, but that the trouble did not begin recently, when the French concluded they would no longer support Diem. The trouble, said General Collins, went far back of that, and into the very beginning of the efforts of this impossible fellow to form a government. The President said he had understood the facts to be otherwise, and that the undermining of Diem by the French had been a material and substantial contributing cause to the present plight of the government. Collins said he did not wish this repeated outside of the room, but he felt the President had received inadequate and inaccurate intelligence. He expressed the belief that the majority of our intelligence had come from the Palace, and that either the source or the evaluation of the intelligence had not been good.

General Collins told the President of the only plan which he believes is a workable one at this time, - namely, that Quat could be built up and encouraged to take over. He said that Quat could do so, and would do so, only through the intervention of Bao Dai. He said he felt that Quat was the best man on the scene now, and the one most likely to succeed. He said that a Ministry surrounding Quat should include a young man whose name I cannot recall or pronounce, who had at one time been the Minister of Defense. He named several other individuals who in his opinion would rally around Quat and form a government, but that this could only be done under the aegis of Bao Dai. He stated also that Ely concurred in the foregoing views.

Mr. Hoover pointed out that Bao Dai was identified throughout the Far East, and in the American press, as well, as a subsidized French puppet and a symbol of colonialism. He mentioned the possibility that the move suggested by Collins would look like a French move, supported by us. General Collins said he recognized this, but that Bao Dai was a man of more substance than the press gave him credit for being. He spoke of a book he had recently read by a French woman who gave Bao Dai credit for forcing a return of Cochin-China (set aside by the French in 1945 as a colonial plum) into the Associated States as a condition to his return to power.

Under the Collins' plan, he feels that there can be a relinquishment by the Binh Xuyen Sect of the police force, if Quat takes over under Bao Dai. General Collins bases this upon some statements that have been made to some third parties, and apparently the hook-up between Bao Dai and the Binh Xuyen Sect is to be the key to this.

The President said, in substance, that he wanted to know what kind of a plan could be put into effect that would enable us to see whether or not it will be possible to save the area from chaos and communism. General Collins felt that the program he had suggested, though not assured

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of success or viability, struck him at this time as the best course to be followed in a bad situation. The meeting broke up upon a decision that there will be further study made in the State Department, and that Mansfield would be asked in.

I would say that the session amounted to a mere reporting to the President of the state of affairs, and that no decisions were made.

DILLON ANDERSON
Special Assistant
to the President

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