

## Conversation: Meeting Tape 118/A54.3a-b

**Date:** 1963-10-29

**Participant:** John F. Kennedy

**Participant:** Robert F. Kennedy

**Participant:** Maxwell D. Taylor

**Participant:** John A. McCone

**Participant:** McGeorge Bundy

**Participant:** Dean Rusk

**Start Time:** 16:25

**Place:** Cabinet Room

SCROLLER TITLE: "The Road to Disaster"

SCENE SETTER: After several days of discussion about an impending coup against South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm, Kennedy officials remained divided on whether to support the putsch. While all recognized the challenges of working with Diệm, senior officials, especially those at the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency, feared that even a successful coup would hinder the war against the Vietnamese Communists.

**Robert F. "Bobby" Kennedy:** I—this may be the minority, but I just don't see that this makes any sense on the face of it, Mr. President. I mean, it's different from a coup in the Iraq or South American country. We are so intimately involved in this. And what we're doing, really, is what we've talked about doing—we're sitting around this table talking about almost the same thing we talked about four weeks ago: we're putting the whole future of the country and, really, Southeast Asia, in the hands of somebody that we don't know very well, that one official of the United States government has had contact with him, and he in turn says he's lined up some others. It's clear from the map and from the—from [Ngô Đình] Diệm, who's a fighter. I mean, he's not somebody that's like [Juan E.] Bosch, he's just going to get out of there. I mean, he's a determined figure who's going to stick around and, I should think, go down fighting. That he's going to have some troops there that are going to fight, too. That if it's a failure, that we risk such a hell of a lot.

This war, as I understood from [Robert S.] Bob McNamara, was going reasonably well. And whether, just based on these rather flimsy reports that a coup's going to take place in two or three days, to risk the *whole future* of the United States in that area on these kind of reports, which are not extensive, and which don't go into any detail, which don't list—I mean, the reports that have come in from the ambassador don't really list our assets or . . . throw out or give a plan as to what's going to occur and how it's going to take place. I would think we have some very large stakes in the balance here. I mean, we certainly, *I think*, should be entitled to know what's going to happen and how it's going to be effected, and not just hope that the coup's going to go through, and they're going to be able to work it out satisfactorily. I would think unless we knew—we're going to be involved. Everybody's going to say that we did it. Then if we're going to—if we think that's the right thing, I think that we should play a major role. I don't think we can go halfway on it, 'cause we're going to get the blame for it.

If it's a failure, I would think Diệm's going to tell us to get the hell out of the country. And, see, he's going to have enough with his intelligence to know that there's been these contacts and these conversations, and he's going to capture these people. They're going to say, "The United States was behind it." I would think that we're just going down the road to disaster.

Now, maybe this is going to be successful. But I don't think that anybody—any reports that *I've* seen indicate that anybody has a plan to show where this is going. And I think this cablegram, sent out

like it is, indicates that we are willing to go ahead with the coup, but we think that we should have a little bit more information.

*End of excerpt 1.*

**Maxwell D. “Max” Taylor:** I must say that I agree with the Attorney General, Mr. President. I found absolutely no suggestion [that] the military didn’t have their heart thoroughly in the war, and very little in politics in Saigon. I would even go a step farther in saying even a successful coup, I would think, would be a—definitely an immediate setback in the conduct of the war. First, because you’ll have a completely inexperienced government, and secondly, because the provincial chiefs who are so essential to the conduct in the field will all be changed. It’s taken over a year now to develop any really effective work in that area. So while our most optimistic case in the long term just might be good, in the short term it’s going to be bad.

**John A. McCone:** I think our opinion is somewhat the same, what General Taylor expressed. We think that even a successful coup—an unsuccessful coup would be disastrous; a successful coup, in our opinion—I feel very definitely this way—would create a period of political confusion, an interregnum that would seriously affect the war for a period of time which is not possible to estimate. And it might be disastrous.

*End of excerpt 2.*

**President Kennedy:** Well, isn’t it that our correlation of forces are—that they’re almost even in the immediate Saigon area? If that is true, then, of course, it doesn’t make any sense to have a coup. Unless he has information or they can produce information, which would indicate that the balance of force quite easily is on the side of the rebels, then it seems to me that he should discourage it at this time. Is that—

**McGeorge “Mac” Bundy:** The balance of force [*an unidentified speaker acknowledges*] or a tactic of surprise and of takeover, which is what a coup is, I think the basic thing is that we do not want regimental combat teams in a mishmash of a three-day war in Saigon.

**Dean Rusk:** Because that kind of [*unclear*]

**President Kennedy:** Unless—I think we ought to name the units that we think are either in doubt or belong to Diệm. Unless Lodge—unless they can indicate . . . command support in those units, then the forces are equal, and we think that it doesn’t make any sense to have a coup.

*End of excerpt 3.*

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