

= Krulak Mendenhall mission =

The Krulak Mendenhall mission was a fact @-@ finding expedition dispatched by the Kennedy administration to South Vietnam in early September 1963 . The stated purpose of the expedition was to investigate the progress of the war by the South Vietnamese regime and their US military advisers against the Viet Cong insurgency . The mission was led by Victor Krulak and Joseph Mendenhall . Krulak was a major general in the United States Marine Corps , while Mendenhall was a senior Foreign Service Officer experienced in dealing with Vietnamese affairs .

The four @-@ day whirlwind trip was launched on September 6 , 1963 , the same day as a National Security Council (NSC) meeting , and came in the wake of increasingly strained relations between the United States and South Vietnam . Civil unrest gripped South Vietnam as Buddhist demonstrations against the religious discrimination of President Ngô ?inh Di?m 's Catholic regime escalated . Following the raids on Buddhist pagodas on August 21 that left a death toll ranging up to a few hundred , the US authorized investigations into a possible coup through a cable to US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge , Jr ..

In their submissions to the NSC , Krulak presented an extremely optimistic report on the progress of the war , while Mendenhall presented an extremely bleak picture of military failure and public discontent . Krulak disregarded the effects of popular support for the Viet Cong . The general felt that the Vietnamese soldiers ' efforts in the field would not be affected by the public 's unease with Di?m 's policies . Mendenhall focused on gauging the sentiment of urban @-@ based Vietnamese and concluded that Di?m 's policies increased the possibility of religious civil war . Mendenhall said that Di?m 's policies were causing the South Vietnamese to believe that life under the Viet Cong would improve the quality of their lives .

The divergent reports led US President John F. Kennedy to famously ask his two advisers :

The two of you did visit the same country , didn 't you ?

The inconclusive report was the subject of bitter and personal debate among Kennedy 's senior advisers . Various courses of action towards Vietnam were discussed , such as fostering a regime change or taking a series of selective measures designed to cripple the influence of Ngô ?inh Nhu , Di?m 's brother and chief political adviser . Nhu and his wife Madame Ngô ?inh Nhu were seen as the major causes of the political problems in South Vietnam . The inconclusive result of Krulak and Mendenhall 's expedition resulted in a follow @-@ up mission , the McNamara Taylor mission .

= = Background = =

After the Hu? Ph?t ??n shootings on May 8 , civil unrest broke out in South Vietnam . Nine Buddhists were gunned down by the Roman Catholic regime of President Ngô ?inh Di?m after defying a government ban on the flying of Buddhist flags on Vesak , the birthday of Gautama Buddha , and marching in an anti @-@ government protest . Following the shootings , Buddhist leaders began to lobby Di?m for religious equality and compensation and justice for the families of the victims . With Di?m remaining recalcitrant , the protests escalated . The self @-@ immolation of Buddhist monk Thích Qu?ng ??c at a busy Saigon intersection became a public relations disaster for the Di?m regime , as photos of the event made front @-@ page headlines worldwide and became a symbol of Di?m 's policies . As protests continued , the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Special Forces loyal to Di?m 's brother Ngô ?inh Nhu raided pagodas across the country on August 21 , leaving a death toll estimated to be up to a few hundred , and causing extensive damage under the declaration of martial law . Universities and high schools were closed amid mass pro @-@ Buddhist protests . In the meantime , the fight against the Viet Cong insurgency had begun to lose intensity amid rumours of sectarian infighting amongst ARVN troops . This was compounded by the plotting of a coup by various ARVN officers , which distracted attention from the fight against the Viet Cong insurgency . In the aftermath of the pagoda raids , the Kennedy administration sent Cable 243 to the US Embassy , Saigon , ordering an exploration of alternative leadership possibilities .

= = Initiation and expedition = =

At the end of the National Security Council (NSC) meeting on September 6 , it was agreed that the first priority was to obtain more information on the ground situation in Vietnam . US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara proposed sending Marine Corps Major General Victor Krulak on an immediate fact @-@ finding trip . The NSC agreed that Joseph Mendenhall ? a Foreign Service Officer with Vietnam experience ? would accompany him . The pair began the mission later the same day .

On their return trip to Washington , D.C. , Krulak and Mendenhall were to bring John Mecklin and Rufus Phillips back from Saigon to report . Mecklin was the United States Information Service (USIS) director , while Phillips served as the director of rural programs for United States Operations Mission (USOM) and as an advisor for the Strategic Hamlet Program . The State Department sent the Saigon embassy a detailed cable containing questions about Vietnamese public opinion across all strata of society . In Krulak 's own words , the objective was to observe " the effect of recent events upon the attitudes of the Vietnamese in general , and upon the war effort against the Viet Cong " .

In a fast paced four @-@ day trip , the two men traveled throughout Vietnam before returning to Washington to file their reports . Krulak visited 10 locations in all four Corps zones of the ARVN and spoke with US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge , Jr . , the head of US forces in Vietnam General Paul Harkins and his staff , 87 US advisors , and 22 ARVN officers . Mendenhall went to Saigon , Hu? , Da Nang , and several other provincial cities , talking primarily to Vietnamese friends . Their estimates of the situation were almost completely opposite . Mecklin wrote afterwards that it " was a remarkable assignment , to travel twenty @-@ four thousand miles and assess a situation as complex as Vietnam and return in just four days . It was a symptom of the state the US Government was in . " The mission was marked by the tension between its leaders . Mendenhall and Krulak intensely disliked one another , speaking to each other only when necessary . Mecklin and Krulak became embroiled in a dispute during the return flight . Krulak disapproved of Mecklin 's decision to bring television footage that had been censored by the Di?m regime back to the US , believing the action was a violation of sovereignty . After a long and bitter argument aboard the aircraft , Krulak called upon Mecklin to leave the film in Alaska during a refueling stop at Elmendorf Air Force Base , further suggesting that the USIS director remain with the film in Alaska .

= = Report and debriefing = =

The NSC reconvened on the morning of September 10 to hear the delegation 's reports immediately after its return from Vietnam . Mendenhall had previous experience in Vietnamese affairs , having served under the previous US Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow . Durbrow had urged Di?m on a number of occasions to implement political reform . Krulak was a marine known for his belief in using military action to achieve foreign affairs objectives . His temperament earned him the nickname " Brute " , which originated from his wrestling career at the Naval Academy . The Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric noted that Mendenhall was regarded " with great suspicion on the Virginia side of the river [the Pentagon , headquarters of the Defense Department] " , whereas Krulak was " universally liked and trusted in the Pentagon , both on the civilian and military side " .

The backgrounds of Krulak and Mendenhall were reflected in their diametrically opposite analyses of the war . Krulak gave a highly optimistic analysis of the military progress and discounted the effect of the Buddhist crisis on the ARVN 's fight against the Viet Cong . His general conclusion was that " [t] he shooting war is still going ahead at an impressive pace . It has been affected adversely by the political crisis , but the impact is not great . "

Krulak asserted that a substantial amount of fighting was still required , particularly in the Mekong Delta , which was regarded as the Viet Cong 's strongest region . Krulak asserted that all levels of the ARVN officer corps were very conscious of the Buddhist crisis , but he believed that most had not allowed religious beliefs to negatively affect their internal military relationships to a substantial

degree . He believed that the ARVN officers at all levels were obedient and could be expected to carry out any order they regarded as being lawful . Krulak further asserted that the political crisis had not significantly damaged bilateral military ties . Moving along to the Vietnamese view of their leaders , Krulak predicted that there was dissatisfaction among the officers , which he believed was mainly directed at Ngô ?inh Nhu , the younger brother of Di?m who was widely seen as the power behind the regime . Krulak believed that most officers wanted to see the back of Nhu , but that few were willing to resort to a coup . Krulak reported that three US advisers strongly criticized the Nhuses and advocated the pair 's departure from South Vietnam in order to avoid a public relations disaster at the United Nations . However , Krulak felt that these problems were outweighed by what he believed to be a successful military effort . Krulak felt that the war would be won irrespective of the political leadership . He predicted that the ARVN had little ability to facilitate an improvement in governance and felt that they would not flex whatever muscle they had . Krulak optimistically concluded :

Excluding the very serious political and military factors external to Vietnam , the Viet Cong war will be won if the current US military and sociological programs are pursued , irrespective of the grave defects in the ruling regime .

Mendenhall strongly disputed Krulak 's assessments . He argued that the anti @-@ Di?m sentiment had reached a level where the collapse of civilian rule was possible . He reported a " reign of terror " in Saigon , Hu? and Da Nang , observing that the popular hatred usually reserved for the Nhuses had spread to the generally respected Di?m . Mendenhall asserted that many Vietnamese had come to believe that life under Di?m worse than being ruled by the Viet Cong . Mendenhall thought that a civil war on religious grounds was possible . He predicted that the war could only be won with a regime change , otherwise South Vietnam would collapse under sectarian infighting or a massive communist offensive . The diametrically opposite nature of the two reports prompted Kennedy 's famous query , " You two did visit the same country , didn 't you ? "

= = = Debate = = =

Krulak attempted to explain the contrasting assessments by pointing out that Mendenhall had surveyed urban areas , while he ventured into the countryside " where the war is " . Krulak asserted that political issues in Saigon would not hamper military progress , stating " We can stagger through to win the war with Nhu remaining in control . " Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman asserted that the contrasting reports " was the difference between a military and a political view " . During the debate over the differences in outlook , Mendenhall asserted that Saigon had suffered " a virtually complete breakdown " following the pagoda raids . Mendenhall reported that Vietnamese public servants feared being seen with Americans . He recalled one visit when he had to remain quiet while his Vietnamese host crept around the room , searching for hidden microphones . Mendenhall asserted that " Saigon was heavy with an atmosphere of fear and hate " and that the people feared Di?m more than the Viet Cong . He reported many public servants no longer slept at home due to a fear of midnight arrests by Nhu 's secret police . Many officials had recently spent the bulk of their day negotiating the release of their children , who had been incarcerated for participating in pro @-@ Buddhist protests . Mendenhall asserted that internal turmoil was now a higher priority than the war against the communists .

Mendenhall denounced Saigon 's reconciliation and goodwill gestures towards the Buddhists as a public relations stunt . He reported that monks from provincial areas who had been arrested in Saigon for demonstrating were not returned to their places of origin as promised . Mendenhall noted that when the monks were released , Di?m 's officials retained their identification papers . This resulted in their re @-@ arrest upon attempting to leave the capital . The monks were then branded as Viet Cong because they did not have government identification papers . As news of such tactics spread across the capital , some monks sought refuge in the Saigon homes of ARVN officers . Mendenhall insisted that the United States was responsible for the situation because it had helped the Ngo family gain power , armed and funded it . He reasoned that as Di?m used the arms against his own people , Washington also shared responsibility . He stated that " a refusal to act would be

just as much interference in Vietnam 's affairs as acting " .

According to the Pentagon Papers , " the critical failure of both reports was to understand the fundamental political role that the army was coming to play in Vietnam " . The papers concluded the ARVN was the only institution capable of deposing and replacing Di?m . Di?m and Nhu fully realized the potential threat , responding with the divide and conquer paradigm . They usurped the prerogative of senior officer promotion and appointed generals based on loyalty to the palace , giving orders directly to officers . This action caused deep distrust among the senior officers and fragmented their power . Krulak failed to realize that if the situation deteriorated to the point where discontent with Di?m posed the possibility of a communist victory , the generals would intervene in politics because of what would happen to them under communist rule . Neither Krulak nor Mendenhall seemed to anticipate that if a military junta came to power , the divisive effect of Di?m 's promotion politics would manifest itself as the generals vied for power . Neither of the pair put any emphasis on the detrimental effects that would have been caused by political infighting among the generals .

During the NSC meeting , Frederick Nolting ? who preceded Lodge as US Ambassador to South Vietnam ? took issue with Mendenhall 's analysis . Regarded as a Di?m apologist , Nolting pointed out that Mendenhall had been pessimistic about South Vietnam for several years . Mecklin , reinforced and pushed Mendenhall 's view further , calling on the administration to apply direct pressure on Saigon by suspending non @-@ military aid , in an attempt to cause a regime change . In Mecklin 's words :

This would unavoidably be dangerous . There was no way to be sure how events would develop . It was possible , for example , that the Vietnamese forces might fragment into warring factions , or that the new government would be so incompetent and / or unstable that the effort against the Viet Cong would collapse . The US should therefore resolve now to introduce American combat forces if necessary to prevent a Communist triumph midst the debris of the Di?m regime .

The Pentagon Papers opined that Mecklin understood the pitfalls of a military junta that Krulak and Mendenhall had overlooked . Regardless , Mecklin concluded that the US should proceed in fostering a regime change , accept the consequences , and contemplate the introduction of US combat troops to stop a possible Viet Cong victory .

The NSC meeting then heard Phillips ' bleak prognosis of the situation in the Mekong Delta . He claimed that the Strategic Hamlet Program was a shambles in the delta , stating that they were " being chewed to pieces by the Viet Cong " . When it was noted that Phillips had recently witnessed a battle in the delta , Kennedy asked Phillips for his assessment . Phillips replied : " Well , I don 't like to contradict General Krulak , but I have to tell you , Mr. President , that we 're not winning the war , particularly in the delta . The troops are paralysed , they 're in the barracks , and this is what is actually going on in one province that 's right next to Saigon . " Phillips asserted that removing Nhu was the only way to improve the situation . Phillips asserted that the only means of removing Nhu was to bring in Colonel Edward Lansdale , the CIA operative who had consolidated Di?m 's position a decade earlier , a proposal that Kennedy dismissed . Phillips recommended three measures :

Terminate aid to the ARVN Special Forces of Colonel Le Quang Tung , who took his orders directly from the palace and not the army command . Tung had led the raids on Buddhist pagodas on August 21 in which hundreds were killed and widespread physical destruction occurred . The Special Forces were used mainly for repressing dissidents rather than fighting communists .

Cut funds to the Motion Picture Center , which produced hagiographic films about the Nhuses .

Pursue covert actions aimed at dividing and discrediting Tung and Major General Tôn Th?t ??nh . Dinh was the military governor of Saigon and the Commander of the ARVN III Corps . Dinh was the youngest general in the history of the ARVN , primarily due to his loyalty to the Ngo family .

In the ensuing debate , Kennedy asked Phillips what would happen if Nhu responded to the cuts by diverting money away from the army to prop up his personal schemes . When Kennedy asked if Nhu would blame the US for any resulting military deterioration , Phillips replied that the ARVN would revolt , because the ARVN officers were on Viet Cong hit lists would not allow the communists to run loose . Phillips said that if Nhu tried to divert military aid away from the troops to prop up his personal schemes , the Americans could deliver the money straight to the countryside in suitcases .

= = = Robust disagreement = = =

The meeting became confrontational when Krulak interrupted Phillips , asserting that American military advisers on the ground rejected the USOM officer 's assessments . Phillips conceded that although the overall military situation had improved , this was not the case in the crucial delta areas . Phillips noted that the provincial military adviser in Long An Province adjacent to Saigon , had reported that the Viet Cong had overrun 200 Strategic Hamlets in the previous week , forcing the villagers to dismantle the settlement . McNamara shook his head at the radically divergent reports . When Krulak derided Phillips , Assistant Secretary of State W. Averell Harriman could no longer restrain himself and called the general " a damn fool " . Phillips diplomatically took over from Harriman and asserted that it was a battle for hearts and minds rather than pure military metrics .

Mecklin generated more disquiet by advocating the use of American combat troops to unseat the Di?m regime and win the war . He asserted that " the time had come for the US to apply direct pressure to bring about a change of government , however distasteful " . Mecklin asserted that there would be a backlash if aid was simply cut , so US troops would have to directly fix the problem . Mecklin later wrote to USIS head Edward R. Murrow to insist that US troops would welcome combat in the case of a communist escalation . On the journey back to the United States , he had asserted that the use of American combat forces would encourage the coup and lift morale against the Viet Cong . He also called for the engineering of a coup . He called for the US to show more intent .

The pessimism expressed by Phillips and Mecklin surprised Frederick Nolting , who preceded Lodge as the US ambassador in Saigon . Nolting said that Phillips ' account " surprised the hell out of me . I couldn 't believe my ears . " Nolting asserted that Mecklin was psychologically vulnerable to being brainwashed because he had recently split with his wife . At the time , Mecklin was living with journalists David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan of The New York Times and UPI respectively . Halberstam and Sheehan both won Pulitzer Prizes and were strident critics of Di?m .

= = Aftermath = =

One strategy that received increasing consideration in NSC meetings ? as well as at the US Embassy , Saigon and in Congress ? was a suspension of non @-@ military aid to Di?m . After the erroneous Voice of America broadcast on August 26 , which announced an aid suspension , Lodge was given the discretion on August 29 to suspend aid if it would facilitate a coup . In the meantime , the US Senate began to pressure the administration to take action against Di?m . Hilsman was lobbied by the Senate Subcommittee on the Far East . Senator Frank Church informed the administration of his intention to introduce a resolution condemning Di?m 's anti @-@ Buddhist repression and calling for the termination of aid unless religious equality was instituted . This resulted in Church agreeing to temporarily delay the introduction of the bill to avoid embarrassing the administration .

While the delegation was in Vietnam , the strategy of using a selective aid suspension to pressure Di?m into ending religious discrimination was actively discussed at the State Department . In a television interview on September 8 , AID Director David Bell warned that Congress might cut aid to South Vietnam if Di?m did not change his policies . On September 9 , Kennedy backed away from Bell 's comments , stating " I don 't think we think that [a reduction in aid to Saigon] would be helpful at this time . " On September 11 , the day after Krulak and Mendenhall tabled their reports , Lodge reversed his position . In a long cable to Washington , he advocated the consideration of using non @-@ military aid suspension to spark the toppling of Di?m . Lodge concluded that the US could not get what it wanted from Di?m , and had to force events to come to a head . After another White House meeting on the same day , Senator Church was informed that his bill was acceptable , so he introduced the legislation into the Senate .

The National Security Council re @-@ convened on September 17 to consider two of Hilsman 's proposals for dealing with Di?m . The plan favored by Hilsman and his State Department colleagues was the " pressures and persuasion track " . This involved an escalating series of measures at both

public and private level , including selective aid suspension and pressuring Di?m to remove Nhu from power . The alternative was the " reconciliation with a rehabilitated GVN track " , which involved the public appearance of acquiescence to Di?m 's recent actions and an attempt to salvage as much as possible from the situation . Both proposals assumed that an ARVN coup was not forthcoming . The inconclusive report saw a follow @-@ up mission sent to Vietnam , the McNamara Taylor mission , led by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell D. Taylor .