

THE VIETNAM WAR

A FILM BY KEN BURNS & LYNN NOVICK

Leadership and Decision Making

Activity 3: Kennedy and the Diem Coup: The Torch Is Passed

Timeline: 1961-1963

Introduction:

Students will explore the military coup of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and the Kennedy administration's degree of complicity.

Materials:

Video Clips:

- Promoting a Coup in South Vietnam
- South Vietnam: Diem and Nhu

Summarizing Points

- Roger Hilsman Jr.'s cable to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge
- US concern about the Diem regime
- Lodge's decision to endorse a coup
- Kennedy's message to Diem during Cronkite interview
- Kennedy's advisors' disagreement regarding the coup
- Kennedy's instructions to Lodge

Documents

- White House memos (selection from [The National Security Archive](#))
- [Draft cable from Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman Jr. to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge.](#)
- Conference with President Kennedy, National Security Council, former Ambassador Frederick C. Nolting reviewing disagreements on supporting a coup, [August 29, 1963.](#)
- [Document No. 192 from CIA to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, October 9, 1963.](#)
- White House communications to Ambassador Lodge [DOCUMENT 20](#) and [DOCUMENT 21.](#)

Procedure:

1. View the first video segment, "Promoting a Coup in South Vietnam."
2. Discuss the video segment as a class using the summarizing points.
3. Have students review and discuss the White House memos and summarize the

main points of disagreement over the Diem regime. Explain that President Kennedy was faced with a difficult decision. The Diem regime was brutal and didn't follow American values; however, it was the only viable government in South Vietnam suitable to US goals in the region. It was becoming clear that the regime was losing support of the military and the South Vietnamese people.

Tell students: Faced with this decision, President Kennedy has asked you to make a recommendation regarding a possible coup of the Diem regime. Will you advise him to:

- a) Strongly oppose a coup and try to reform the Diem regime.
- b) Do not encourage a coup, but don't stand in the way, either.
- c) Help encourage a coup.

Students can work in groups or individually to determine their recommendation. They should be prepared to present and defend their decision

4. Show the final segment "South Vietnam: Diem and Nhu," which reveals what Kennedy decided to do and why. Have students compare and contrast their decisions with that of Kennedy; they should then write a brief analysis of Kennedy's and their own decisions.

Post-Activity Questions:

- What surprised you about the outcome of Kennedy's decision to not stand in the way of a coup? Does this change your decision in any way? Explain.
- What is your opinion of President Kennedy's decision? Explain.
- What might have been the outcome if President Kennedy had chosen a different option, such as strongly opposing the coup instead of letting it happen?
- After allowing the coup to take place, what do you think should be President Kennedy's next move?