

CIA Operations Officer Lucien Conein: A Study in Contrasts and Controversy

William J. Rust



Lucien E. Conein in OSS personnel file photo most likely taken in 1945 on his promotion to captain. For most OSS officers and their CIA successors, notoriety was to be avoided. The French-born Conein would prove to be an exception, becoming to many of those who knew him and would learn of him a legend—in many ways the epitome of clandestine operational success. The qualities that earned him that place were skill and courage, historic circumstance, and the force of personality. Often guilty of foolhardiness, poor judgment, exaggeration, and indiscretions, Conein, others felt, was unworthy of emulation.

I first met Lucien E. “Lou” Conein, CIA’s principal contact with the South Vietnamese generals who overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, at Dominique’s, a once elegant but now defunct French restaurant in Washington, DC, not far from the White House. It was 1981, and I was interviewing him for a book I was writing about the Kennedy administration and the Vietnam War. Then 61, Conein was just under six feet tall, with thick white hair, a deep, booming voice, and an impish smile accented by bushy, animated eyebrows. His most distinguishing physical characteristic was the absence of fingertips down to the first joints on his index and middle fingers of his right hand.

A profane, irreverent raconteur, Conein punctuated his answers to my questions with colorful language and idiosyncratic slang: CIA was “the cookie factory,” and conducting covert operations was “playing cowboys and Indians.” He characterized the plotting South Vietnamese generals as “corporals with stars on their shoulders” and incapable of organizing “a two-car funeral.” Not once did he project the “hint of barely restrained violence” that a former CIA colleague detected at their first meeting in the 1950s.¹

My initial meeting with Conein was followed by several more interviews that became source material for *Kennedy in Vietnam*. There was nothing particularly exclusive about my conversations with Conein, who spoke to journalists in Vietnam and to historians after the war. His willingness to talk was welcomed by writers, but his information was not always accurate. A sympathetic evaluation of Conein early in his intelligence career acknowledged his “flair for exaggeration.”² His service in the French Army, 1940–41, was sometimes portrayed as a more romantic-sounding assignment in the French Foreign Legion. And he often implied that the loss of his fingertips occurred during a hazardous intelligence operation, when in fact the injury happened while repairing an automobile engine.

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“One of the problems with Conein is that he told you these marvelous stories, but they didn’t always pan out,” said Stanley Karnow, a foreign correspondent and historian who abandoned a Conein biography because of the dubious accuracy of his subject’s recollections. “I had a hell of a time trying to figure out what was true and what was false.”³

Sorting fact from fancy in Conein’s life story has become somewhat less difficult with the release of a growing number of declassified government records documenting his career in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its successor intelligence agencies, most notably CIA. Reports by and about Conein, background investigations, and other official documents tell the story of a rough-hewn paramilitary officer who was a polarizing figure within the US government. To many CIA officers he worked for, Conein was an experienced professional—dedicated, courageous, and loyal. Among Agency security officers, however, there were persistent concerns about his heavy drinking, multiple wives, and emotional volatility. Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., the American ambassador in South Vietnam during the Diem coup, found Conein’s covert machinations indispensable to US policy objectives. Yet Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was appalled that an “unstable Frenchman” was the CIA liaison with the rebellious generals.⁴

The story that follows is not only one of a controversial intelligence

officer, but also an account of OSS and its successor agencies balancing Conein’s operational effectiveness with the security risk posed by his impulsive, erratic personal behavior. Richard Helms, a former director of central intelligence (DCI) whose career often intersected with Conein’s, wrote in his memoir that he doubted there was “any government activity encompassing the mix of personnel as that in OSS or CIA.” Another observation Helms made about intelligence agencies is perhaps even more relevant to Conein: “We’re not in the Boy Scouts.”⁵

“Judgment not always good”

Born in France on 29 November 1919, Conein was the illegitimate son of Lucien Xavier Conein. The infant’s birth was registered under his mother’s surname, Elin, in the 14th District of Paris. The father subsequently acknowledged the paternity of the child, who took his name. In a personal history statement for OSS, Conein listed his father’s occupation as a soldier who had served in the Zouaves, the dashing light infantry noted for colorful open waistcoats and baggy trousers. The older Conein died when Lucien was five years old.

His mother, Estelle Elin, sent the boy to live with her sister in Kansas City, Kansas. A World War I war bride, Conein’s aunt had married a disabled US Army veteran. Brought up in a strict household, Conein had below-average grades in high school

and “associated with the son of a Kansas City policeman who had a wild reputation,” according to one of his many background checks.⁶ Dropping out of high school during his junior year, Conein was hired by a printer in 1936 and later moved out of his aunt’s home to live with the family of his employer.

While working as a pressman and typesetter, Conein joined the Kansas National Guard, Company G, 137th Infantry Regiment. To help defend his native country against invading Nazis, Conein joined the French Army in 1940 as a private in an antitank battery. After the fall of France, Conein made a daring escape through North Africa, receiving a hero’s welcome in Kansas City in 1941. In September of that year, he married Marian Marshall of Kansas City. The marriage was an impetuous act of spite—aimed both at a former girlfriend who refused to marry him and at the parents of his bride, who reportedly “objected to his character.”⁷ The marriage lasted six months.

Conein enlisted in the US Army the same month he wed. Army life agreed with him. He received a promotion to private first class in January 1942 and to corporal the following July. In August, he became a naturalized US citizen. Conein was assigned to the 3rd Student Training Regiment at the Infantry Officer Candidate School, Fort Benning, Georgia, in the spring of 1943. He was asked to volunteer for OSS, a request based on his fluent French and his familiarity with that country’s culture. Like many OSS recruits, he received his initial training at Area F, the code name for the Congressional Country Club in suburban Washington leased to the government during World War II.

Conein received further training at Area B, a mountainous wooded area in secluded northern Maryland, an area ideal for large-scale paramilitary exercises. In the fall of 1943, he shipped out for Great Britain, where he received tactical and parachute training from the Special Operations Executive, the UK’s clandestine sabotage and commando organization. First Lieutenant Conein was selected as a member of Jedburgh team MARK, a multinational unit of volunteers who parachuted into southwestern France in August 1944 to assist the Maquis in guerrilla warfare against the Germans. Maj. Henry B. Coxe, a senior US leader of the Jedburgh program, reported that Conein had completed his mission in France in a “superior manner.”⁸

Conein returned to the United States on 21 December 1944. An OSS evaluator described him as “voluble,” “energetic,” and “resourceful.” He was “a man of action—chiefly of independent action. Impetuous and sometimes rash, but dynamic and capable of inspiring men to follow his orders.” Conein had a “high war motivation—he enjoys fighting,” according to the assessment. His “lack of conservatism,” a consequence of a poorly disciplined, “often reckless” adolescence, made him “somewhat unreliable. Judgment not always good.”⁹

An officer of “proven worth”

In preparation for a new assignment to the Far East, Conein attended the OSS West Coast Training Center on Santa Catalina Island for advanced instruction in such subjects as demolition, communications, and reporting. A combat veteran who had

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been promoted to captain, Conein appeared to have little interest in mere training. “Showed poor discipline and might be a trouble-maker in the field,” according to one assessment. “Not too friendly and even tended to be antagonistic at times.” Conein was abruptly dropped from the program, with the comment that he was “no good” and the recommendation that he be transferred back to the regular army.¹⁰

As would often be the case in his career, Conein’s operational value outweighed his personal behavior. Unlike the West Coast evaluators, who gave him mostly “average” marks for his training, Major Coxe had given Conein’s combat performance the highest rating in virtually every category, including leadership, motivation, and practical intelligence. In Washington, a representative of the OSS Personnel Procurement Branch (PPB) looked into the West Coast training decision to release Conein, observing that the case appeared to have been handled in an “almost ludicrously incompetent and stupid” fashion: There was “not much sense in PPB breaking its neck to recruit” officers if another OSS branch could easily “dispose of men of proven worth.”¹¹

In the spring of 1945, Conein was transferred to OSS Detachment 202 in China, where he trained irregular forces along the border with French Indochina—today’s Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Conein led a successful guerrilla attack against

a Japanese divisional headquarters in northern Vietnam on 9 July. His team of French, Chinese, and American commandos then embarked on a 23-hour forced march through enemy-occupied territory to attack a Japanese garrison, before withdrawing to safety in China.

During the final two weeks of the Pacific war, he led his guerrillas in missions against Japanese patrols and outposts in northern Indochina. A threatened attack by Japanese forces prompted local allied commanders to recommend that Conein abandon the area: “He chose to remain and defend his position against advancing columns of Japanese.”¹²

Conein was awarded the US Bronze Star for meritorious service in Indochina in August 1945. He also received three European decorations for bravery during World War II: the French Croix de Guerre with Bronze Star, the French Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur, and the British Mention in Despatches award. Many years later, a CIA assessment of Conein’s wartime record concluded that it had been “very satisfactory.”¹³

Among the earliest Americans to enter Hanoi after the war, Conein met the Vietnamese revolutionaries Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap.^a In

a. For an account of OSS engagement with the Viet Minh and its leadership see, Bob Bergin, “Old Man Ho: The OSS Role in Ho Chi Minh’s Rise to Political Power” in *Studies in Intelligence* 62, no. 2 (June 2018), <https://internet.cia/library/center-for->

later years, Conein publicly expressed contradictory positive and negative views of the two communist leaders. What is clear is that in 1945, when many OSS officers throughout Southeast Asia sympathized with nationalists seeking independence from their prewar European masters, Conein favored the French. According to a confidential informant, French intelligence officers in northern Vietnam unsuccessfully tried to recruit him as an agent. A fact about Conein’s service in Vietnam, subsequently revealed to CIA personnel security staff during a polygraph test, was that he had smoked opium on two occasions in 1945.¹⁴

The most significant aspect of Conein’s first tour of duty in Vietnam was making the acquaintance of many noncommunist Vietnamese soldiers, some of whom became senior officers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and led the coup d’état against President Diem eighteen years later. Without diminishing the importance of his initial assignment in Vietnam, it is worth noting that Conein was there for less than six months. For the next six years, he served in Germany, an improbable posting brought about by his messy personal life but sustained by his professional performance.

“A spotty reputation”

In December 1945, more than two months after OSS had been officially dissolved and its operational branches transferred to the War Department’s Strategic Services Unit (SSU),

[the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-62-no-2/old-man-ho.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-62-no-2/old-man-ho.html).



Captain Conein (fifth from the left) with others receiving the French Legion of Honor on 3 December 1947 at European Command Headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany. US Army photo, NARA.

William G. Suhling Jr., chief of the SSU mission in Germany, wrote to headquarters about “a critical situation.” With American citizen-spies demobilizing there and around the world, Suhling was “disturbed” to learn that replacements for departing espionage and counterintelligence personnel would not be arriving in the near future. Among the personnel he “urgently” requested was a company-grade officer to serve as the mission’s mess officer, an undemanding position that would allow much time for intelligence work.¹⁵

The SSU replies to Suhling included the announcement that Conein would be his new mess officer. The choice appeared to be an odd one. Conein spoke no German, and his specialty was paramilitary operations, not espionage or counterintelligence. Senior officials in the War Department, however, had insisted that

SSU assign Conein to an “innocuous position” in Europe for the purpose of marrying Monique Denise Pierre Veber.¹⁶ A member of a politically influential French family, she had been romantically involved with Conein after the liberation of Paris. Conein, having few good options, accepted the assignment and married Veber in April 1946. (This was the third marriage for Conein, who had wed and promptly divorced Gwendolyn Axsom in 1943.) Conein and Veber’s relationship produced two children, but their marriage ended in divorce after 20 months.

Despite the unusual reason for his assignment in Germany, Conein began to prove his value in an intelligence duty that Lt. Col. Louis E. Kubler, the SSU mission’s executive officer, characterized as “peculiar”: resettling agents who had outlived their usefulness.¹⁷ This work included

altering and forging birth certificates, identity cards, and other documents—deceptive arts that likely benefited from Conein’s prewar printing experience. The “disposal” of spent agents often included financial rewards to help ensure their continuing allegiance to the United States. “Loyal and effective collaborators deserve to be left with a smile,” Helms, then chief of SSU’s Central Europe Branch, wrote in his memoir.¹⁸ (He did not, however, comment on the appropriate treatment of less satisfactory former agents.) One can easily imagine Conein as both a convivial traveling companion for relocating agents and a menacing threat to those tempted to reveal their relationship with US intelligence.

Conein’s fitness for intelligence work was a controversial topic among officials in SSU and its successor agencies, the Central Intelligence Group (CIG) and CIA. In Washington, personnel officers declared that his “evident inability to stay within certain social regularities might lead him to placing the organization in an embarrassing position.” Helms, however, concluded that Conein was loyal, dependable, and imaginative. Resettling “burned out agents” and defectors posed little security risk, he argued. Moreover, Conein was unaware of the mission’s clandestine espionage and counterintelligence operations.¹⁹

Conein’s status within CIA was finally settled by Brig. Gen. Edwin K. Wright, deputy director of central intelligence: “The services rendered by the subject [Conein] in a highly technical and delicate field have more than indicated his loyalty and devotion. These very activities have sobered and steadied the subject to

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a point where in my opinion little consideration need be given to any earlier derelictions.”²⁰

While serving in Germany, Conein furthered his formal education by taking courses at the University of Maryland’s College of Special and Continuation Studies, an off-campus program initially established on US military bases in Germany in 1949. During his tour there, Conein earned more than two years of college credit. Although he did not receive a degree, his superiors were nonetheless impressed with his progress as an intelligence officer. In June 1951, the chief of station in Karlsruhe described Conein as

*the most remarkable case of self-improvement by study and self-discipline I have witnessed in this organization. Starting with a spotty reputation, Conein has seriously applied himself to self-education, both by outside study and by a conscientious and levelheaded approach to the job given him.*²¹

From November 1951 to May 1952, Conein was chief of CIA’s Nuremburg Operations Base. When Conein left Germany in 1953, Lt. Gen. Lucian K. Truscott Jr., the senior CIA representative in Germany, praised him for his “valuable contribution” to the Agency’s work there.²² During his assignment in Germany, Conein married his fourth wife, Carmen Adkisson, a clerk in the CIA mission who subsequently resigned from the Agency. They divorced in 1957.

“Rough as a cob or . . . gallant and gracious”

After a brief desk job at CIA Headquarters—his “forte is not administration,” according to one efficiency report²³—Conein returned to Vietnam on 1 July 1954. This was three weeks before the conclusion of the Geneva Conference, which ended the First Indochina War and divided Vietnam into provisional regrouping zones, with the communist-led Viet Minh in the north and French forces in the south. Now a major, Conein was a member of the Saigon Military Mission (SMM), which conducted paramilitary operations against the Viet Minh and worked to stabilize the new anticommunist government led by Ngo Dinh Diem.

The leader of SMM was Col. Edward G. Lansdale. An Air Force intelligence officer “detailed” to CIA, he had helped suppress the Huk rebellion in the Philippines and had been an influential adviser to defense minister and later president Ramón Mag-saysay. SMM operated independently from the “regular” CIA station in Saigon, led by Emmett J. McCarthy. According to Thomas L. Ahern Jr., a retired CIA operations officer and contract historian, Lansdale reported to neither McCarthy nor the Agency’s Far East Division but directly to DCI Allen W. Dulles: “Allen Dulles seems simply to have regarded Lansdale as his personal agent in matters of Third World instability.”²⁴

According to Rufus Phillips, a member of SMM who had joined CIA in 1952, “Conein could be rough as a cob or as gallant and gracious as

After SF approval of the technique that would become high-altitude, low-opening parachuting, Conein was named “the first officer in charge of Military Free Fall training within the Special Warfare Center” at Fort Bragg.

the occasion demanded.” Conein’s contacts in Vietnam, Phillips wrote in his memoir, “extended throughout the local French community and were particularly good with the Corsicans, some of whom he had met in Marseilles after the surrender of the French army in 1940. They ran many of the bars and night clubs in Saigon. He had also developed contacts in the French and Vietnamese armies and with émigré North Vietnamese, noncommunist political groups.”²⁵

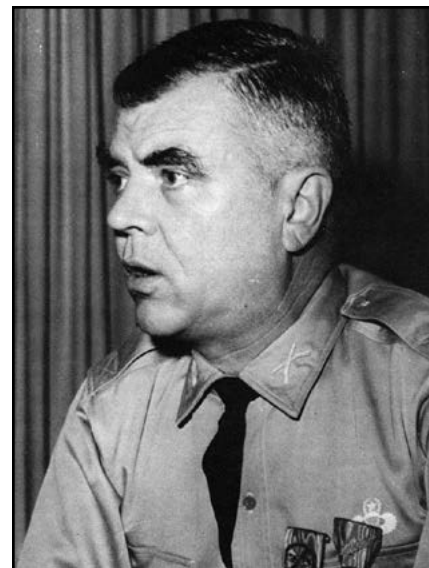
Conein was initially assigned to Hanoi, where he organized stay-behind resistance groups and conducted sabotage missions. One operation was contaminating the oil supply of a bus company to gradually destroy the vehicles’ engines. Before leaving Hanoi in October 1954, the deadline for withdrawal of all foreign forces from the north, Conein thought it would be a good idea to boobytrap the refrigerator in his home with C-3 plastic explosive and an electric detonator. Plugging in the appliance would destroy the house, a mansion that would likely be occupied by a high-ranking Communist Party official. This plan and proposed sabotage operations against infrastructure in northern Vietnam were vetoed by US diplomats.²⁶

Returning to Saigon, Conein trained and infiltrated anticommunist Vietnamese agents into the north. He later recalled that the results of these missions were “zilch.”²⁷ Moreover, some of his agents were doubled by Viet Minh security services. Conein’s assignment with SMM

ended on 28 April 1955, when he began working for the “regular” CIA station in Saigon. In a formal assessment of his performance with SMM, Lansdale wrote that Conein was “a good, strong right-hand man in a tight spot and proved it in a number of tense situations during this assignment.” Privately, however, Lansdale was blunter, referring to him as “the Thug.”²⁸

In October 1956, Conein temporarily severed his connection with CIA and returned to the regular army. Since World War II, he had been a US Army officer assigned to OSS, SSU, CIG, and CIA. The army informed him that any further promotion would require additional military training and service with troops. In late 1956, Conein completed the six-week course for Special Forces (SF) officers at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. After SF approval of the technique that would become high-altitude, low-opening parachuting, Conein was named “the first officer in charge of Military Free Fall training within the Special Warfare Center” at Fort Bragg. Promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1958, Conein successively commanded two battalion-equivalent detachments of the 77th Special Forces Group.²⁹

Conein married Elyette Brochot in Dillon, South Carolina, on 30 March 1958. Born in central Vietnam, she had met Conein during his assignment with SMM. A French citizen, Elyette Conein became a naturalized American in 1959. This marriage,



Conein in an undated photo from the 1960s. Courtesy of author.

Conein’s fifth and final one, lasted until his death 40 years later.

“Four shots per day”

Conein was assigned to the US Army’s assistant chief of staff for intelligence in 1959. For nearly two years, he served as an adviser to the intelligence directorate of the Iranian Imperial Army. Near the end of his tour, Edward Lansdale—then a brigadier general working in the Pentagon’s Office of Special Operations—responded to a request from CIA to “quietly” check on Conein’s future plans. According to a memorandum for Desmond FitzGerald, chief of CIA’s Far East Division, “Lansdale feels that Conein is very anxious to come back and work for the Agency.”³⁰

Conein retired from the army and rejoined CIA as a civilian in the fall of 1961, when President John F. Kennedy was stepping up the US military advisory effort in South Vietnam. Conein would be going back to

Saigon to advise the chief of station, fellow Jedburgh veteran William E. Colby, on paramilitary matters. He would not, however, be a staff member of the Agency. Instead, he would be a CIA contract employee. Such arrangements were sometimes made for “particularly well-qualified individuals who cannot meet all requirements for staff employment.”³¹ Throughout the hiring process, questions were raised about Conein’s drinking. CIA’s personnel security staff was apparently not reassured by his admission of drinking excessively in the mid-1950s but currently limiting “himself to four shots per day.” An additional complicating factor for staff employment might have been his most recent certified personal history statement, which listed only two of his four divorces.³²

Operating under military cover, Conein worked with the South Vietnamese government’s Ministry of Interior on the Strategic Hamlet pacification program. Not long after his arrival in Saigon, two South Vietnamese pilots bombed and strafed Diem’s presidential palace on 27 February 1962. The damage to the palace was substantial, but Diem was uninjured. Colby, who had been chief of station in November 1960, when South Vietnamese paratroopers launched an unsuccessful coup d’état, asked Conein and another CIA paramilitary specialist, Russell F. Miller, to canvass South Vietnamese military leaders to gauge the depth of their dissatisfaction with Diem. Conein and Miller reported to Colby that “there was some dissent, but it was not organized dissent.”³³

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mark of American optimism about the fight against the communist-led insurgency. He was praised for his paramilitary contributions, his role as “honorary” executive officer of the SF command, and his liaison work with senior members of the South Vietnamese military, many of whom were “general officers, long term friends and former subordinates.” The only performance quibble was his report writing, which could “stand improvement.” John H. Richardson, Colby’s successor as chief of station, commended Conein’s knowledge of Vietnamese affairs: “I have personally leaned heavily on his judgment and advice. Our high appraisal of [the] Subject is shared by the Ambassador [Frederick E. Nolting Jr.] and by the Deputy Chief of Mission [William C. Trueheart].”³⁴

Talk of a coup begins

During the Buddhist crisis of 1963—a political-religious confrontation between the South Vietnamese government and its noncommunist opposition—rumors of plots to topple the Diem regime multiplied. On 8 July, Maj. Gen. Tran Van Don, acting chief of the Joint General Staff (JGS), told Conein that the military had “plans to overthrow the government.” With the exception of one or two generals, Don said, all agreed that “the entire Ngo family”—President Diem, his younger brother and adviser Ngo Dinh Nhu, his caustic sister-in-law Madame Nhu, and his youngest brother Ngo Dinh Can,

the despotic satrap in central Vietnam—“must go.” Don “specified no timing for action.”³⁵

Momentum for a coup slowed after Nhu, the regime’s powerful éminence grise, indicated to the generals that he was aware of military conspiracies.

Plotting intensified, however, after government attacks on Buddhist pagodas in Saigon, Huế, and other South Vietnamese cities on 21 August. The reversal of the regime’s stated policy of conciliation with the Buddhists prompted State Department officials to draft the infamous cable of 24 August. Declaring that the United States could no longer “tolerate” Nhu’s commanding position in government, the telegram called for his, and possibly Diem’s “removal” from power.³⁶ The message and subsequent cables between Washington and Saigon kicked off a weeklong effort by the US government to stimulate a military coup d’état. Conein was the principal intermediary with the conspiring South Vietnamese generals, who finally said they were not ready to move. In a 31 August cable to CIA Headquarters, Richardson wrote: “There is little doubt GVN [South Vietnamese Government] aware [of the] US role and may have considerable detail.”³⁷

Although senior Washington officials wanted as much information as possible about coup planning, some were anxious about continuing to use Conein as the Agency’s key contact with the plotting generals.

Executing orders “explicitly”

On 2 October 1963, General Don told Conein that the South Vietnamese military “now had a plan” for a coup. Moreover, Maj. Gen. Duong Van “Big” Minh, a respected officer who held the meaningless position of military adviser to the president, wanted “a private conversation” with the American. Three days later, Conein had an embassy-approved meeting with Minh, who outlined three possible plans, one of which involved assassinating Nhu and Can and keeping Diem as president.³⁸ David R. Smith, a former member of Lansdale’s SMM and the acting chief of station after Richardson’s recall to Washington, recommended to Ambassador Lodge, that the United States “not set ourselves irrevocably against the assassination plot,” as Minh’s other



One of Conein’s senior contacts, Maj. Gen. Tran Van Don, had been a friend of Conein’s for 18 years. Photo © Keystone Press/Alamy Stock photo.

plans would likely cause “a bloodbath in Saigon” or a lengthy civil war.³⁹

In his report to CIA Headquarters, Smith wrote that he and a visiting Agency official—whose name has been redacted—thought the plan to assassinate Nhu and Can while retaining Diem was “naive.” The South Vietnamese president, Smith wrote, “probably would not cooperate with the perpetrators of those acts.” Confirming that he would not act on any of Minh’s proposals without instructions “from the highest level,” Smith declared that he had “considerable confidence” in Conein’s ability to “carry out whatever role in this affair that HQS may direct.”⁴⁰

The initial CIA response to Smith about Minh’s assassination proposal was that “we certainly cannot be in the position of stimulating, approving, or supporting assassination, but on the other hand, we are in no way responsible for stopping every such threat of which we might receive even partial knowledge. We certainly would not favor the assassination of Diem.”⁴¹ This reply to Smith was apparently too equivocal for DCI John A. McCone. On 6 October 1963, CIA headquarters directed Smith to withdraw his recommendation to Lodge that the United States not oppose the assassination of Nhu and Can: “We cannot be in [the] position [of] actively condoning such [a] course of action and thereby engaging our responsibility therefor.”⁴²

Without commenting on assassination plans, Washington’s policy

instructions to Lodge reflected the deep divisions within the Kennedy administration about the strengths and weaknesses of Diem and his opposition: The United States would neither “stimulate” nor “thwart” a coup attempt. What tilted American policy toward encouraging a coup, however, was the assurance to the generals that the US government would not “deny economic and military assistance to a new regime if it appeared capable of increasing [the] effectiveness of [the] military effort, ensuring popular support to win [the] war and improving working relations with [the] U.S.”⁴³

Although senior Washington officials wanted as much information as possible about coup planning, some were anxious about continuing to use Conein as the Agency’s key contact with the plotting generals. *The Times of Vietnam*, a mouthpiece for the Diem regime, had accused CIA of attempting a coup and using Conein to foment it. When President Kennedy sought more information about the CIA officer, Defense Secretary McNamara declared:

*He’s a colorful figure, a Lawrence of Arabia type. He is well known to all the reporters in Vietnam. He is well known to the Vietnamese government, and here he is contacting an individual [General Minh] that is known to be a dissident and a probable coup leader. It’s as open as though we were announcing it on the radio. To continue this type of activity just strikes me as absurd.*⁴⁴

Although the comparison of Conein with the Oxford-educated archaeologist, writer, and intelligence

officer T. E. Lawrence was risible, McNamara's concerns about the security risks posed by continued reliance on a highly visible CIA operative were well founded. DCI McCone was initially optimistic that the Agency could establish "another channel" for communication with the generals.⁴⁵ One proposed replacement was Maj. Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, who had arrived in Saigon the previous April. A combat veteran of World War II and Korea who had served as chief of CIA's Far East Division during 1949-52, Stilwell was the chief of operations for the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), a position that provided natural cover for meeting with senior ARVN officers. The plotting generals, however, distrusted MACV, especially its perennially optimistic commander, Gen. Paul D. Harkins, who thought it would be "incongruous" for the US government to "get rid" of Diem after nine years of support.⁴⁶

Ambassador Lodge, who disapproved of the Diem regime, resisted Washington's attempt to replace Conein as the US contact with Don. The CIA station in Saigon, Lodge wrote to Washington, had "been punctilious in carrying out my instructions," and Conein had executed the ambassador's orders "explicitly." Lodge pointed out that the CIA officer was "a friend of some eighteen years' standing with General Don, and General Don has expressed extreme reluctance to deal with anyone else. I do not believe the involvement of another American in close contact with the Generals would be productive."⁴⁷

McCone, however, worried that Don might be a Nhu-managed agent who was trying to control

INCOMING TELEGRAM		Department of State	
44-41	SECRET	Control: 113	
Action		Rec'd: NOVEMBER 1, 1963	
FE		4:29 AM	034
Info	FROM: CAS SAIGON		
SS	TO: Secretary of State		
G	INR NO: 3, DTG 010921Z NOVEMBER (CIA MESSAGE)		
RMR	FLASH		
	ACTION FLASH DIRNSA; INFORMATION FLASH USIB AGENCIES, DEPARTMENT OF STATE		
	CRITIC		
	CONEIN REPORTS FROM JGS THAT GEN VIG MINH ONCE MORE CALLED PRESIDENT DIEM AND DIEM HUNG UP AS OF 1715 HOURS. MINH HAS GIVEN THE ORDER TO BOMB THE PALACE. THIS APPARENTLY REFUTES RADIO ANNOUNCEMENTS THAT PRESIDENT HAS RESIGNED WHICH BROADCASTED APPROX 1710 HR.		
	GP-1		
	JVC/28		
	NOTE: ADVANCE COPY TO S/S-0 AT 4:31 AM NOVEMBER 1, 1963		
<p>DECLASSIFIED PUBLISHED IN FRUS 1961-63 VOL IV DOC # 258 (Note) By MAD NARA Date 8/07</p>			
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One of Conein's numerous situation reports as delivered to State Department and White House officials. The reports made clear he was at the center of coup activity observing each step. Image courtesy of JFK Library.

or entrap Conein. And McNamara continued to fret about the lack of professionalism in covert US contacts with the generals. "We're just like a bunch of amateurs," he said at a White House meeting on 25 October. "I hate to be associated with this effort—dealing with Conein." In a followup comment, McNamara observed: "We're dealing through a press-minded ambassador and

an unstable Frenchman—five [sic] times divorced. That's the damndest arrangement I've ever seen. This is what we have to stop."⁴⁸

Conein's contact with Don did not stop, but their security practices improved. Lodge informed Washington of "a new security system" for the two conspirators that included cutouts for communications, safety signals,

and countersurveillance for their meetings.⁴⁹

“Controversial” accounting

At 1:15 p.m., Friday, 1 November, the South Vietnamese generals launched their coup d'état. Summoned by the generals to their command post at JGS headquarters near Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Conein was asked to bring as much money as he could readily gather. According to a report on the Diem coup by the CIA inspector general (IG), “The station had stored 5 million piasters (about \$68,000 at the official rate) in a safe in Conein’s house against such a contingency. Conein took 3 million with him. General Don used the money to reward opposition military units that joined the coup group.”⁵⁰

On 2 November, when General Don requested more money to pay “the families of persons killed during the coup,” Conein delivered another 1.75 million piasters to him. (An “overlooked” bundle of 250,000 piasters was later found in Conein’s safe.) As noted in the IG report, the passing of US funds to the generals was “obviously a very sensitive matter.” At the very least, providing a financial “reward”—in other words, a bribe—to ARVN commanders joining the coup made the US government an accessory to Diem’s overthrow. The transfer of funds also apparently involved some dubious accounting. Walter Elder, McCone’s executive assistant, later cited this episode to DCI William Colby as an example of “controversial” uses of Agency funds:

As you well know when Lou Conein received his summons to report to the Joint General Staff Headquarters on 1 November



Maj. Gen. Duong Van “Big” Minh (left) with members of the military junta that replaced President Ngo Dinh Diem on 2 November 1963. Undated photo © Everett Collection/Alamy

President’s Intelligence Checklist, 2 November 1963⁵¹

1. South Vietnam
 - a. The deaths of Diem and Nhu just about wrap up the generals’ coup.
 - b. Not all versions of the story are the same, but it would appear that the brothers either committed suicide, or were done in after they surrendered. We suspect the latter.
 - c. The population of Saigon, in a jubilant mood today, has pulled down several symbols of Madame Nhu’s authority and sacked the offices of the Times of Vietnam and another pro-Diem paper.
 - d. Ambassador Lodge was cheered as he drove through the streets. There have been no indications of anti-American sentiment.
 - e. We believe there may be some temporary dislocations in the counterinsurgency effort, particularly the strategic hamlet and paramilitary programs which Nhu had been running. Much will depend on the continuity of officialdom at the province level.
 - f. Initial reactions from Hanoi and Peiping have been characteristic. The US has put in “one puppet for another.” We know that Viet Cong has long had standby plans to try to take advantage of a coup, but we have noted no implementation as yet.

1963 a large amount of cash went with him. My impression is that the accounting for this and its use has never been very frank or complete.⁵²

The same could be said for Conein’s subsequent testimony about the Agency funds before the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, better known as the Church Committee. When pressed to discuss the money’s purpose, Conein testified that it was used for food, medical supplies, and “death benefits.” He made no mention of a “reward” for troops joining the coup. He was also unable to remember the amount of money he took to JGS headquarters: “Truthfully, I don’t recall if I had 3½ million or 5 million piasters.” He was, however, able to remember that he had obtained signed receipts for the funds: “Now, I do not know where those receipts are.”⁵³

While the coup was nearing its successful conclusion on the morning of 2 November, Generals Don and Minh asked Conein to secure an airplane that would take the surrendering Ngo brothers to the first country offering them asylum. Conein passed this request to Acting Chief of Station Smith, who replied that it would take 24 hours to secure an aircraft with sufficient range for a nonstop flight to a country that might provide asylum. Such a plane—for example, a KC-135 tanker from Guam—would prevent Diem from disembarking at an interim stop and declaring a government-in-exile. Conein later testified that he did not know whether this instruction originated with Lodge, the State Department or the White House.⁵⁴

The Diem coup was the pinnacle of Conein’s career as an intelligence officer. He secretly received CIA’s Intelligence Star for his role as liaison with the generals during the planning and execution of the putsch.

Any discussion about securing a plane for Diem and Nhu was overtaken by their murder, most likely by Minh’s aide-de-camp, Capt. Nguyen Van Nhung. Yet the 24-hour delay required to arrange safe passage for the Ngo brothers raised a question that “has not been convincingly” answered, according to Thomas H. Hughes, director of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the 1960s. In an oral history interview, he asked: “Why, during the preceding weeks, were contingency arrangements not made for giving Diem refuge or for flying him out of Vietnam? The impression remains that American officialdom was content to leave Diem and his brother to the postcoup mercies of the plotters.”⁵⁵

In 1975, the Church Committee investigation into the alleged role of US officials in plots to assassinate foreign leaders concluded that the US government “offered encouragement for the coup, but neither desired nor was involved in the assassinations” of Diem and Nhu.⁵⁶ Yet the explanation for the delay in arranging safe passage for the Ngo brothers was “unsatisfactory,” according to Rhett B. Dawson, the committee’s minority counsel, who worked with Republican senators: “The whole incident casts a pall over American involvement in the assassinations of Diem and Nhu.”⁵⁷

The Diem coup was the pinnacle of Conein’s career as an intelligence officer. He secretly received CIA’s Intelligence Star for his role as liaison

with the generals during the planning and execution of the putsch. His personal behavior in the summer and fall of 1963 may have been rowdy, but it was undoubtedly professionally useful. John M. Dunn, then a US Army lieutenant colonel and special assistant to Ambassador Lodge, characterized Conein as “a brawler, really. He’s a guy that likes to get out and have a good time in the most basic soldierly way. And he used to do rather a lot of that with a number of the Vietnamese officers.”⁵⁸

“Bum” or “imaginative and dedicated officer”?

Saigon Station’s “History of the Vietnamese Generals’ Coup of 1/2 November 1963,” written in the immediate aftermath of Diem’s assassination, concluded by wondering whether General Minh, head of the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), appreciated the complexity of the political and military problems he faced. If not, station officers asked, “what new coup group is forming now?”⁵⁹

That question was answered on 30 January 1964, when Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh staged a bloodless coup, toppling Minh’s government. Commander of I Corps, the tactical zone comprising South Vietnam’s five northernmost provinces, Khanh had played a limited role in Diem’s overthrow and felt slighted by the MRC since the coup. Conein, who had been in Washington during much of January, returned to Vietnam just as Khanh’s coup was ending. The

After an unusually eventful career as an intelligence officer, Conein unsuccessfully pursued private business opportunities in South Vietnam. He might have remained a relatively obscure CIA retiree were it not for a fellow member of the second Lansdale mission to Vietnam: Daniel Ellsberg.

general wanted Conein to be “continuously available on five minutes notice” as his civilian interlocutor with Ambassador Lodge. (MACV’s Col. Jasper Wilson was Khanh’s choice for indirect communication with General Harkins.) According to Ahern, Conein’s “meetings with Khanh were devoted mostly to political gossip and such trivialities as office logistics and a Khanh request that Conein develop for him a contingency plan for escape from Saigon.”⁶⁰

Lodge’s successor, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, disliked both Khanh and Conein. A former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and an esteemed military intellectual, Taylor had shared McNamara’s distaste for

the CIA officer during the plotting against Diem. On 2 September 1964, less than two months after his arrival in Saigon, the new ambassador demanded Conein’s recall to Washington. Although Taylor would later refer to Conein as a “bum,” Chief of Station Peer de Silva described his subordinate as “an imaginative and dedicated officer who can be counted on to discharge his duties with high effectiveness and total personal commitment. It has been a pleasure to have him at the Station.”⁶¹

After the abrupt end of his Vietnam tour, Conein prepared for a planned assignment to Caracas, Venezuela. In the summer of 1965, however, Taylor’s none-too-successful term as ambassador ended, and Henry Cabot Lodge returned to Saigon as the US chief of mission. With him came by-then retired General Lansdale as an adviser on rural pacification, the longstanding political-economic-security effort to generate support for the South Vietnamese government and to undermine the authority of the southern communists. Lansdale, no longer affiliated with CIA, assembled a small team of experienced Vietnam hands. Among them was Conein, who arrived in Saigon on 29 September.

A CIA employee on special assignment with Lansdale’s team, Conein served in Bien Hoa, just north of Saigon. His responsibilities included advising, financing, and supplying South Vietnamese Census-Grievance

Teams, which provided intelligence on communist political and administrative cadres, and Provisional Reconnaissance Units, which used such information for “operations designed to capture or, when capture is impossible, ambush Viet Cong cadre.” Conein’s work in Bien Hoa reflected CIA’s conviction that “the extirpation of the VC cadre system is the sine qua non for pacification.”⁶²

Conein left Vietnam in August 1967, under circumstances that are not entirely clear. He told me that an alcohol-fueled incident in which he tossed flower pots from the roof of a Saigon hotel onto the street below prompted his exasperated chief of station, Gordon L. Jorgensen, to ask for his recall. Rufus Phillips, however, wrote in his Vietnam memoir that the flower-pot episode merely resulted in Conein’s banishment “to the most remote province in South Vietnam, Phu Bon.”⁶³ What is clear from Conein’s declassified personnel records is that CIA pulled his special clearance for communications intelligence in July and ordered him to take a physical in August.

Agency officials were apparently fed up with Conein’s drinking. After his return to Washington, CIA began the process of terminating its relationship with him. Yet a review of his records also suggests that his Agency colleagues wanted to reward Conein for many years of faithful service. A new personal services contract, effective 10 January 1968, authorized his participation in federal programs for retirement income, life insurance, and health benefits. Within weeks of that date, Conein filed for “retirement for medical disability,” which was approved in May. The official date for Conein’s resignation as a CIA



Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, the military leader who would unseat the government of General Minh just three months after he had overthrown Diem. Photo © Keystone/Alamy.

employee was 15 July 1968, a date that allowed him to exhaust all of his accrued sick leave and excess annual leave.⁶⁴ He was 48 years old.

“Very pro-Agency”

After an unusually eventful career as an intelligence officer, Conein unsuccessfully pursued private business opportunities in South Vietnam. He might have remained a relatively obscure CIA retiree were it not for a fellow member of the second Lansdale mission to Vietnam—Daniel Ellsberg. Lansdale, who had wanted to influence McNamara’s views on the war, selected Ellsberg for the team because of his prior work for the defense secretary and other top Pentagon civilians. As was often the case, things did not turn out as Lansdale had hoped. Disillusioned by the war, Ellsberg later provided the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* with copies of the 7,000-page, top-secret Defense Department history of the Vietnam War, commonly known as the Pentagon Papers. On 1 July 1971, the *Times* devoted several full pages to US involvement in the Diem coup and reprinted half a dozen top-secret documents that specifically mentioned Conein.

Within a week, Conein was invited to the White House by a recently hired, part-time security consultant—E. Howard Hunt, one of the “plumbers” whose work included stopping government leaks. A former OSS and CIA officer known to Conein, the two retired spies spent a boozy afternoon discussing the Diem coup and Ellsberg. Sometime after their chat, Hunt recommended hiring Conein as a consultant. According to his later Church

The Nixon White House was reportedly pleased by Conein’s appearance in the documentary. CIA officials, however, were disturbed by the egregious violation of his lifetime secrecy oath.

Committee testimony, Conein said that he “worked as a consultant for the White House for approximately four months.”⁶⁵

At a time when President Richard M. Nixon publicly declared that “the way we got into Vietnam was through overthrowing Diem and the complicity in the murder of Diem,”⁶⁶ White House officials requested and received sensitive national security documents about US involvement in the coup and other covert missions. Such requests, according to a commission led by Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller, were aimed at finding “embarrassing” information that “would be used for the political advantage of the Nixon administration.”⁶⁷ When Hunt’s review of the relevant cables between Washington and Saigon did not prove Kennedy administration complicity in the death of Diem, White House aide Charles W. Colson and Hunt agreed that the latter “might be able to improve upon the record” by fabricating more incriminating telegrams.⁶⁸

Hunt produced two fake cables, one of which instructed Ambassador Lodge to deny any asylum request from Diem. Colson told Hunt to “show the entire set of cables, including the forgery, to Col. Lucien Conein.” The idea was to convince him that “the Kennedy administration had been responsible, implicitly responsible, for the assassination of Diem.”⁶⁹ Hunt encouraged Conein to be interviewed for an NBC documentary about the Diem coup, “providing he was properly briefed.” Hunt said

that he “would take care of coordinating” Conein’s TV appearance with the Agency and gave him some two dozen cables, including the bogus telegrams, “to refresh his memory.” According to Hunt, Conein accepted the cables as “genuine.”⁷⁰

On 22 December 1971, NBC News broadcast “The Death of Diem.” Conein was one of some 20 US and South Vietnamese officials interviewed on camera. Although he spoke at length about his role as liaison with the plotting generals, Conein said nothing about US responsibility for the assassination of the Ngo brothers. Moreover, he confirmed NBC News reporting that placed the blame for Diem’s death squarely on the generals.⁷¹

The Nixon White House was reportedly pleased by Conein’s appearance in the documentary. CIA officials, however, were disturbed by the egregious violation of his lifetime secrecy oath. The day of the broadcast, an Agency division contemplating rehiring Conein was advised that he “should not be used in any capacity” and that further contact with him should be “avoided.”⁷² On 31 January 1972, Howard J. Osborn, CIA’s director of security, reported to DCI Helms on a lunch that he had with Conein. When Osborn asked why he had agreed to be interviewed by NBC, Conein replied that Hunt had “encouraged and sponsored” him. Osborn, who found “Conein to be personable, cooperative, and very pro-Agency,” reported to Helms that the retiree “has either conquered or is

working on his drinking problem (he had only one beer).”⁷³

Buried on Bastille Day

While Hunt and Colson went on to infamy and jail for their roles in the June 1972 Watergate break-in and the subsequent cover-up, Conein went to work as an intelligence officer for the Justice Department’s Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs and its successor organization, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). His

notoriety as a celebrity spy, however, kept him in the spotlight. In January 1975, there was an unproven public allegation that Conein sought to equip DEA with anonymous assassination devices—for example, exploding telephones, triggered by motion, sound, or timer. Later that year, the Church Committee released its report on alleged assassination plots, which discussed the Diem coup and Conein’s role in it.

Conein retired from DEA in 1984 and died on 3 June 1998. He

was buried at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors for service during some of the most significant epochs of the 20th century—World War II in Europe and Asia, the post-war recovery of Germany, and, of course, the first and second Indochina wars. For a naturalized American citizen born in Paris, the date of Conein’s burial was chosen with care: 14 July, the day he traditionally served as honorary judge of Dominique’s Bastille Day waiters’ race.



The author: William J. Rust is the author of five books about US relations with Southeast Asian nations during the mid-20th century. Learn more about them at www.beforethequagmire.com.



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