

Whose Coup? The Alliance of Park Chung-hee and Kim Jong-pil

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Abstract

The historiography of the one of the most significant events of the “Park Chung-hee Era” has changed little in the past decades. Recent research does not analyze the agency of Park and his fellow coup makers. It has largely been taken for granted that Park was the architect and leader of the May 16th coup that eventually brought him to power. However, in 2015, new interviews with Kim Jong-pil were released that strongly contradicted much of the traditional narrative. Kim, one of the main coup leaders, strongly asserted that he was the mastermind behind the coup, and that he enlisted Park to the cause, not the other way around. By comparing Kim’s new narrative with the primary record, this paper attempts to assess the veracity of his comments that challenge the conventional narrative.

Keywords: South Korea, United States, May 16, coup d’état, military revolution, Park Chung-hee, Kim Jong-pil, Kim Dong-ha, Kim Yoon-geun, Carter Magruder, United Nations Command, Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Se-jin, Kim Chong-shin, Cho Gap-je

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Introduction

Kim Jong-pil, the prominent South Korean politician known as the “kingmaker,” died on June 23, 2018 at age 92. During an illustrious political career that spanned five decades, Kim helped three men of opposing political viewpoints attain the presidency. He founded the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), led four political parties, and was elected to the National Assembly nine times. He was the first South Korean politician to serve as prime minister twice. Despite his proven savvy and political successes, the presidency eluded Kim. In his obituary, *The New York Times* noted that Kim was known as “the perpetual No. 2.”¹

Kim's runner-up status stems from the event that brought him to power and politics, the May 16th coup d'état. The decades old narrative of the 1961 military revolution paints the former Army lieutenant colonel as a "henchman" that executed Major General Park Chung-hee's plans to topple Chang Myon's government.² Initial accounts published by the junta presented Park as the leader in planning and executing the coup, while later accounts provided a broader perspective of the participants and motives. However, these narratives were soon drowned out by the "Park Chung-hee Boom." South Korean journalist Cho Gab-je's popular biography *Spit on My Grave* was typical of this period and many historians continue to rely heavily on his 1997 account of Park's leading role in the revolution.³ Although Kim's obituary in *The Korea Herald* suggested he "played a key role in the 1961 military coup led by Park Chung-hee,"⁴ it nonetheless followed the conventional narrative that Park was responsible for the coup and Kim merely supported the action.

Three years before he passed, Kim contradicted the traditional narrative in a series of interviews with the *Korea JoongAng Daily*. In his account, the 89-year old claimed to be the mastermind of the coup. In contrast to the published accounts, Kim was responsible for recruiting and encouraging Park to join the revolution. Kim's assertions may represent an attempt to set the record straight or elevate his political and historical legacy. Regardless, Kim's account should be compared to the historical record as his statements are one of the few first-hand accounts of these events.

This paper examines Kim's claims that he played a leading role in the May 16th coup, focusing on the period from 1960 to 1963. The paper begins by reviewing the accounts of the coup published by the junta, historians, and biographers. These accounts, particularly those written during the "Park Chung-hee Boom," minimize the agency of those around Park; Kim Jong-pil is regularly described in literature in one manner or another as Park's "henchman," ignoring any significant agency of his own.⁵ Next, the paper summarizes the key points presented in the *Korea JoongAng Daily* interviews, in which Kim asserted that he instigated the revolution as a culmination of pressures placed upon him. Lastly, the paper compares Kim's claims to other accounts, including recently declassified U.S. Government reports. This paper finds that because Kim's claims of responsibility for the coup are backed by ample evidence in the primary record, historians should reexamine the agency and specific responsibility of key individuals associated with the military revolution.

Narratives of the May 16th Coup

The period of the coup and junta, from 1961 through 1963, is underrepresented in historic literature as compared to later eras and topics related to Park Chung-hee's rule, particularly industrialization and the democratic movement. Moreover, current scholarship has been slow to bring in new sources and perspectives. Much of what is written about the coup and junta period is mere regurgitation of a decades-old narrative.

Little work exists—especially in the English literature—that attempts to parse out the specific details of the coup. Many of the ideas presented in the current histories are extremely close to those presented in the junta's own publications from the early 1960s. Such ideas include: 1) Park was the one who decided a coup was necessary; 2) Park came up with the coup plan; 3) Park organized and led the revolutionaries; and, 4) it was Park's ideals that the junta represented. It seems taken for granted that since Park eventually rose to ultimate power, everything must have been part of his grand scheme. In other words, the ends prove the means.

However, a closer examination of the historiography of the May 16th coup d'état reveals three distinct narratives. The initial books produced by military junta presented Park as the undisputed leader of a revolution. Subsequent accounts by scholars, as well as participants in the coup, noted that other military officers were critical to planning and executing the actions that toppled the Second Republic. Biographers and journalists later restored Park as the leader of the coup, presenting the revolution and its leader as critical to South Korea's development.

The Junta's Early Histories

Almost immediately upon taking power, Park's military junta that seized control of the government began its own messaging and propaganda campaign to shape the public narrative of what had happened and what was to come. Combined with censorship and pressure against the press, the junta official propaganda also included books published in Park Chung-hee's name. These included works such as *Our Nation's Path: Ideology of Social Reconstruction* and *The Country, the Revolution, and I*, first published in 1962 and 1963, respectively.

At the time these books were published, Park had dispatched his rivals and secured his place as chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction (SCNR). In such a context, it was only appropriate for the

junta to release a narrative that reinforced Park's supremacy. Given the power struggles and challenges to his rule, Park would only have approved such a narrative. However, at the time of the release of this book, severe doubts existed in the U.S. diplomatic community about Park's authorship. Historian Gregg Andrew noted that "In a telegram entitled 'The State, Revolution and I—A Revealing Book by Pak Chonghui,' 1 September 1963, the American ambassador to South Korea Phillip Habib refers to widespread doubts about the authorship of the book."⁶ Regardless, this narrative tainted much of the academic and public work that followed, as authors and researchers borrowed heavily from the official publications due to a lack of direct access to the internal politics of the junta and civilian government that came after.⁷

The Triangle: Park Chung-hee, Kim Jong-pil and Kim Dong-ha

Political scientist Kim Se-jin challenged the junta's narrative of the coup in his dissertation, "Military Revolution in Korea, 1961-1963." Completed outside of Korea in the years immediately following the coup, Kim Se-jin's account questioned Park's leading role in the revolution. The University of Michigan doctoral candidate argued the coup was a product of three military officers "capitalizing on such a highly chaotic and vulnerable political and military situation were those who had been associated with agitation in the military throughout the years: Park Chung-hee, Kim Dong-ha, and Kim Jong-pil."⁸ Published in 1971 as *The Politics of Military Revolution in Korea*, Kim Se-jin wrote, "Park Chung-hee and Kim Jong-pil formed the first two sides of the triangle. The third is Kim Dong-ha. A retired Marine Major General, Kim Dong-ha played a vital role in the coup by providing most of the troops actually used for the takeover of the capital city, Seoul."⁹

The political scientist noted the two Kims shared similar frustrations with their military superiors that would ultimately lead to both officers being dismissed from the service. Kim Jong-pil was forced from the Army for demanding the resignation of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the "Revolt Against the Seniors," while Kim Dong-ha was dismissed from the Marine Corps after accusing the Commandant of financial irregularities and vote rigging.¹⁰ Kim Se-jin notes the Marine general had other motivations for joining the revolution and efforts to plan the coup:

Confronting the same situation as Kim Jong-pil, Kim Dong-ha developed a strong feeling of resentment both

for the Marine leadership and for the government. Also, being an ardent anticommunist from North Korea, he was easily attracted by the revolutionary group, whose chief article of faith was anticommunism. Moreover, he, like most other *Northeastern*-oriented officers, resented the *Northwestern* prejudice of the Chang government and of the Army Chief of Staff, Lt. General Chang Do-young; and his revolutionary orientation received in Manchuria must have given him the final push for his decision to take part in the military coup.¹¹

Kim Se-jin's research not only highlighted the fact that officers besides Park believed revolution was necessary, but noted the diverse factors behind their decision to participate in the coup. In addition to the triangle, the author used a ship metaphor to underscore the close relationship between the coup leaders: "With these three men—Kim Jong-pil, Park Chung-hee, and Kim Dong-ha—as the engine, hull, and fuel, the ship of the revolution was launched."¹²

Kim Dong-ha's long rivalry with Kim Jong-pil ended when the Marine general exposed financial irregularities within the KCIA and attempted to recruit officers for a counter-coup.¹³ The KCIA discovered the plan, court-martialed General Kim Dong-ha in April 1963, and removed him from all posts within the SCNR.

Although Kim Dong-ha never wrote a memoir, the Marine he recruited to join the conspiracy detailed an account of events in *The Marines and the 5.16 Incident*. In this 1987 Korean language book, General Kim Yoon-geun detailed the critical role played by elements of the 1st Marine Brigade in facilitating the coup. After plans for the coup had been compromised earlier in the day, soldiers from the 30th and 33rd Infantry Divisions as well as the Airborne Brigade remained in the barracks. Kim met Park on the outskirts of Seoul and agreed to commit his Marines in accordance with the original plan. After the Marines dispatched the Military Policemen sent to stop them, other units joined in the coup. General Kim contended the revolution wouldn't have occurred.¹⁴

In contrast to the junta's early histories that featured Park at the center of the revolution, Kim Se-jin and Kim Yoon-geun argued that others played critical roles in planning and executing the coup. The political scientist noted that clashes with the military hierarchy led Kim Jong-pil and Kim Dong-ha to join the revolution. The general argued that 600

Marines from his brigade were the catalyst to overthrowing a government controlling a 600,000-man army.¹⁵ In both accounts, individuals besides Park are critical to the success of the coup. However, these perspectives would quickly be replaced by narratives that returned Park to the center of the revolution.

Reassessing Park Chung-hee

The renewed interest in President Park's life was neither coincidence nor happenstance. Vassar College Professor Seong-sook Moon noted that Chun Doo-hwan used his control of the media and academia to focus on the negative aspects of Park's rule in order to build support for himself:

Chun Doo-hwan, succeeding Park through a military coup and a bloody crackdown on the citizens' uprising in the city of Kwangju, deliberately tried to foster Park's negative legacy in order to distance himself from Park, both despite and because of his apparent resemblance to him."¹⁶

Despite the efforts to cast Park in a negative light, "collective memories of him have shifted from the image of an antinational, fascist dictator to that of a superhuman hero and national savior."

In July 1997, the *ChungAng Ilbo* began publishing a series of articles entitled "An Authentic Record of the Park Chung-hee Period." The conservative *Chosun Ilbo* followed suit that fall, featuring journalist Cho Gap-je's "Spit on My Grave: The Life and Death of a President." Both series would subsequently be published as books, *Chronicle of Park Chung-hee: Reading the History of the Third Republic in One Volume* and a five-volume biography, *Spit on My Grave: The Tragic Life of Park Chung-hee*.

Interest turned to nostalgia in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, International Monetary Fund bailout, massive job losses and persistent economic insecurity.¹⁷ The nostalgia for the "revolutionary leader who developed the Korean economy" ushered in the "Park Chung-hee Boom" or "Park Chung-hee Syndrome."¹⁸ Professor Moon noted that this interest was not confined to scholarly texts, but extended to popular writing genres including memoirs, biographies, biographical novels, personal essays, and comic strips for children.¹⁹ Moon's research said:

. . . that compared with scholarly writings which analyze and assess Park's policy, rule, and thoughts, these popular genres present richer texts for observing public memories of Park, both because these popular texts are far more widely circulated and read than scholarly texts and because the popular genres are much more conducive to emotional portrayals, which can reveal collective wishes and longings.²⁰

A common element of these narratives was Park's position as the leader of the coup that brought him to power.

In February 2000, historical document researchers discovered Park's administrative diary in the *Chong Wa Dae* library. Despite the document's potential significance, a news article ironically noted, no one was "requesting to see the historically important document."²¹ Jay Taylor's work on Chiang Kai-Shek, *The Generalissimo*, showed how useful such primary documents could be.

The influence of secondary sources to include the Cho Gap-je biography is evident in later works related to the Park. One of most thorough descriptions of the revolution available in English is Han Yong-sup's essay "The May Sixteenth Military Coup." In it, Han described the general as "at best, a second-tier leader within the South Korean armed forces."²² However, he wrote that the coup succeeded because Park "could forge myriad military factions into a coalition and imbue it with a sense of purpose and destiny with his vision, charisma, strategic mind and organizational capabilities."²³ Han further noted Kim Jong-pil's subordinate role to Park:

The coup succeeded because Park was a strategic thinker with a keen understanding of power. The formidable KCIA, organized by Kim Chong-p'il, Park's trusted lieutenant, exercised power frequently outside legal supervision to monitor countercoup activities and to conduct covert political operations to suppress or manipulate civilian politicians.²⁴

In short, Han's essay continues the narrative of Park as the leader of the revolution, with Kim being a functionary in a limited supporting role.

Examining the literature associated with the May 16th Military

Revolution from the early 1960s through 2011 reveals several distinct periods and narratives. The initial accounts issued in Park's name and produced by the junta placed Park at the center of the revolution. Subsequent study by scholars and coup participants highlighted the roles of other individuals in the coup's planning and execution. Kim Jong-pil is presented as Park's equal in many of these accounts. Nostalgia for Park, fueled in part by the Asian financial crisis, restored Park as the revolution's uncontested leader. These accounts—which appeared across popular writing genres—shaped both the public perception of Park and future research on the event that brought him to power. However, the mythology of Park Chung-hee has led to conclusions about his actions, plans, and intentions that are not firmly based on evidence or even inconsistent with the primary record. Assessing Kim Jong-pil's assertions against the primary record is critical to understanding his claims to having conceived, planned, and executed the coup d'état that brought Park to power.

Kim Jong-pil Remembers

On March 3, 2015, the *Korea JoongAng Daily* published the first of a series of articles, “Kim Jong-pil Remembers.” Over the next year, the paper would publish over 110 articles, as well as special features, based on interviews with the former politician that took place beginning in October 2014.²⁵ Unlike the *Chosun Ilbo's* series on Park, which was written by a single author, “Kim Jong-pil Remembers” was the product of several authors. Staff reporters Chun Young-ki and Kang Jin-kyu were the primary authors of many of the articles, including the initial articles of the series.

Kim was 89 when the interviews began. He had been out of politics for over a decade, and the nostalgia surrounding the “Park Chung-hee Boom” had faded. Public sentiment shifted against Park, his associates, and his regime's anti-democratic behavior.²⁶ Comparisons of President Park Geun-hye to her father's authoritarianisms helped to amplify this shift. In short, Kim appears to have had little to gain by challenging the established narrative and claiming greater responsibility for a coup that is increasingly being viewed as a black mark on the nation's history.

The first 15 articles of “Kim Jong-pil Remembers” series focused on Kim's recollections of the period from his first meeting with Park in June 1949 to the founding of the KCIA in May 1961. Kim's account confirmed much of the information reported in past histories, including the Army Chief of Staff's knowledge of the revolution and the 30th Infantry

Division's leaking plans of the coup, as well as the actions of Park and Kim in the early hours of May 16.²⁷ The former traveled to meet wavering unit commanders while the latter oversaw the printing of the junta's manifesto. Kim disputes Cho Gap-je's account that Park was drunk on the night of the coup, describing him as "sober and clear-minded with strong determination."²⁸ Kim revealed that he met with a fortune teller known for predicting the outcome of parliamentary elections who not only predicted that the revolution would be successful, but foresaw Park's long rule and ultimate death.²⁹

In short, Kim's accounts were not an attempt to rewrite the history of the military revolution, but appeared to be an attempt to address shortcomings in existing the literature. This makes the statements that contradict standard narratives more significant. The remainder of the paper will focus on those statements related to Kim's relationship with Park in the conception, planning, and execution of the military revolution.

Jointly Deciding to Overthrow the Chang Government

In the fourth article in the series, Kim Jong-pil described the circumstances in which he and Park agreed to plan a coup against the Chang government. Kim had recently been released imprisoned, having publicly demanded the resignation of all senior officers. Although military investigators questioned whether Park was involved in Kim's radical anti-corruption campaign, Kim declared that "Park had nothing to do with my campaign . . ."³⁰ Following his resignation from the army and release from the stockade, Kim met with fellow officers who were involved in the "Revolt Against the Seniors." He then boarded a train for Daegu to meet with Park:

February 19, 1961 is the date on which Park Chung-hee and I concurred on the need for revolution and determined we should be the ones to carry it out. . . . Sitting before Park, I said, "The time has come to carry out the revolution." Park was startled at what I said. But he said he had also thought about the need for revolution and had prepared on his own. . . . After confirming that we were together in the same boat, I told him, "From now on, you have to be in front to lead us." Park nodded, "OK," he said. . . . In retrospect, I might not have set in motion the revolution had I not left the Army. When I was discharged, I was

immensely disappointed. It was only after my dismissal that I began detailing a plan for revolution.³¹

As the passage shows, Kim asserted on several occasions that it was *his* revolution, *his* idea, and the result of a culmination of pressures placed upon *him*. Moreover, Kim suggested that Park was startled by his declaration that the time for revolution had come.

Kim's Timeline of the Military Revolution

In this interview, along with others that follow, Kim made statements contrary to the conventional narrative regarding key milestones in planning the revolution. In the same article, he asserted that “we had talked about the revolution before. But we were just exchanging thoughts and dissatisfactions with national affairs on a sketchy basis without indulging in concrete plans.”³² Underscoring the importance of his February 19 meeting as a milestone for the planning and preparation of the coup, Kim stated, “to be exact, it took 87 days in all.”³³

In a subsequent article, Kim stated that it wasn't until “early in 1961” than an “increasing number of men in uniform began to think the military should be on the forefront of bringing about change rather than waiting for society to do so.”³⁴ In the same interview, he elaborated, “As the proposed date neared, many who were with me in the plan asked who would lead the coup, not knowing it was Park Chung-hee. . . . It was on April 7, 1961, that Park appeared before the officers and declared that he would lead the coup.”³⁵ Kim's account significantly differed from the conventional narrative, which stated that Park started planning and leading the coup as far as a year in advance³⁶, using his name and near-mythical powers of manipulation to recruit fellow officers into the fold. In fact, Kim suggested that he did most of the recruiting, not Park, particularly among the younger colonels.³⁷

Kim's account aligns better with the other records of the period. By April, the ROK government and military counterintelligence agencies had detected the coup plan. Similarly, the American CIA began reporting on various plans to overthrow the Chang government:

. . . one of two existing coups to overthrow ROK Government is led by Major General [Park Chung-hee], Deputy Commanding General, Second ROK Army. . . . Plans discussed throughout ROK Army down to and

including division commanders. . . . on possibility of a military coup. Definite threat exists The plot is supported by ROK Army, student groups and reformists. Leader believed to be General [Park Chung-hee], . . . Chang [Do-Young, Army Chief of Staff] desires arrest [of Park Chung-hee] but has lack of evidence. Believes arrest might trigger coup. . . .ROK Army CIC is investigating the coup. . . . had one-hour meeting with ROK Army Chief of Staff Chang Do-Young on 24 April . . . Chang mentioned that [Park] had talked to him one week earlier. Chang states that he believes no action imminent. . . . Prime Minister Chang Myon is aware of rumors circulating to the effect that a group of malcontents within the Army may be plotting some kind of coup. He attaches little importance to these stories and believes that the situation is by no means dangerous.³⁸

The CIA's report not only fit the leaky political climate of the time, but also aligned with Kim's recollections. Kim recalled handing documents detailing plans for the coup to Park on April 10; Park subsequently shared them with Lieutenant General Chang. Kim stated,

“Park had deep trust in Chang after years of friendship. . . . It was Chang who reinstated Park as a major in 1950 and helped Park have a smooth ride in his military career. . . . In my judgment, it wasn't clear whether Chang would stand with us. He could simply turn our plans over to the authority and get us all busted. . . . That day, Park visited Chang and gave him the plan.”³⁹

Kim's account fits the CIA's timeline of the meeting between Chang and Park.

In fact, Park seemed to have been quite open about his plans. In addition to disclosing the coup to the Army Chief of Staff, Park revealed his plan to Hwang Yong-Ju, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Busan Ilbo*. to obtain operational funds for the revolution. The pair revealed the plan to a flour mill owner, who offered financial backing for the plan. The plan was then leaked to Prime Minister Chang Myon, who ordered his Prosecutor

General to execute an arrest on the day before the coup.⁴⁰

There were other instances in which participants leaked plans for the revolution. Kim recalled that in late April or early May another leak “was made inadvertently by Col. Lee Jong-tae, who was part of our group, when he spilled some details of the plan on a bus to a military officer sitting next to him in a bid to win him over. The officer tipped off the top chain of command.”⁴¹ Park and his peers proved time and again to be blatantly ignorant of what we would today call operational security.⁴² It is difficult to imagine that any plot could have been kept secret for months, if not a year, as the conventional narrative argues. Kim’s account simply seems more accurate.

Perhaps one of the most revealing incidents suggesting Kim may have had more power than Park in the days after the coup occurred during the negotiations with General Magruder over the return of South Korean forces that participated in the coup to the UN Command’s operational control. At first, the junta ignored General Magruder’s demands to return military units to his command and resume their assigned defensive positions. Eventually Park, acting as vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Committee, reached an agreement with the UN Commander-in-Chief on May 24. However, the agreement was rejected by the junta council.⁴³ Following the rejection, General Magruder implied that Kim Jong-pil could “use his influence to seek reconsideration of the disapproval.”⁴⁴ Indeed, while Park’s agreement with Magruder was rejected by the junta, Kim Jong-pil was able to secure support from the SCNR. Moreover, it was the discharged lieutenant colonel who negotiated with the American general on the details of the final agreement.⁴⁵ This challenges the conventional idea that Park was de facto head of the junta and fully in power from the outset.

It was only after circumstances beyond Kim’s control—factionalism, infighting, and public backlash—that Park Chung-hee became the leader portrayed in historical accounts. Interestingly, Park suggests this very idea in *The Country, the Revolution, and I*:

. . . from the very moment I thought about the revolution, I did not want even to be the leader of the revolutionary government, let alone the Third Republic. . . . my position was only the third. I wished only to be an errand-boy in the rear. But, unexpected events took place in quick succession. This was really puzzling to me personally. . . .

Under such circumstances, I was obliged to assume my present position.⁴⁶

These statements could have been designed to portray Park as a humble leader rather than an opportunist. Regardless, witnesses including Kim Chong-shin and Kim Jong-pil, reinforced the idea of Park's humility. Moreover, the passage offered a much simpler explanation than the complex cloak-and-daggers approach that dominated most narratives, namely that Park assumed leadership of the government following the departure of President Yun Po-seon and SCNR Chairman Chang Do-young. For a career military man like Park, this chain-of-command approach would be the natural solution.

Accepting that Kim's timeline is more accurate than the traditional accounts, this paper examines the details of the days surrounding May 16, 1961. Kim's account strongly suggested that he was the architect or even the *de facto* leader of the coup, not Park Chung-hee. There is substantial evidence in the primary record to support this claim.

Competing Characters

One aspect of the primary record that seems to support Kim's narrative is the background and character of the two men most involved in the coup. Despite coming together to overthrow Chang Myon's government, the two men differed politically and ideologically. When faced with ethical military issues, their different backgrounds led Kim to confront the most senior leaders of the armed forces while Park quietly suggested changes or ignored the issue altogether.

The Radical versus the Moderate

Kim Jong-pil was a radical who held extreme views and used harsh tactics to try to enforce them. On the other hand, Park Chung-hee was a man who had chosen to embed himself in a rigid, hierarchical system. Park tried to affect change by working within the limits of this hierarchy.

Park was not active in politics prior in the years prior to the coup. A *New York Times* article written in the days following the coup noted that "For the last ten years or so, General Park has not been much in the public eye."⁴⁷ General Carter Magruder, Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations Command, was more concerned about Kim than Park. In a telegram to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent days after the coup, General Magruder wrote, "[Kim Jong-pil] was the moving spirit that

activated the group of sixteen officers who waited on Chief of Staff General [Chae Yeong-Hi] to demand his resignation. . . . [Kim] was perhaps the foremost of the agitators whose elimination from the ROK Army I have sought over the past year.”⁴⁸ While Park shared similar opinions with Kim on removing corrupt officers from the ranks, Park wrote letter “suggesting” the Army Chief of Staff should resign.⁴⁹

Park’s conflict with then Army Chief of Staff Song Yo-Chan was further detailed by an incident Kim Chong-shin recalled in his book, *Seven Years with Korea’s Park Chung Hee*. At the time, Park was a major general and the commander of the logistics command in Busan. Lieutenant General Song made an official visit to the city, which turned out to be a thinly-veiled operation to “win or force the loyalties of his subordinate generals and officers in the port city to pave the way for the re-election of President Syngman Rhee.” Park arranged a dinner party for Song, his entourage, and the press at a Japanese-style restaurant downtown. During the dinner, the election rigging operation was discussed, referred to as “the great event.” Kim Chong-Shin recalled that “it was at the mention of ‘the great event’ that I overheard General Park blurt out: ‘You Rascal!’ What an unexpected thing to hear from a man like him.”⁵⁰ Song returned to Busan five days before the election to push what Kim referred to as “Operation Pigeon,” which he said was “a CIC plan designed to insure 90 percent of the military votes for the pro-government candidates.”⁵¹

Park “refused to cooperate” with the plan and did not encourage his subordinates to get involved in the vote-rigging scheme. However, aside from minor arguments with other officers, Park did nothing to oppose the plan.⁵² His stubborn refusal to participate in the military leadership’s plans ended up making Park an enemy of Song and other senior officers. It was in the context of professional animosity—which should not be ignored—that Park eventually sent the letter to Song.

In short, Kim was a known political radical whom General Macgruder sought to remove for as long as a year.⁵³ In contrast, Park was seen as the “coolest head and most reliable and stable leader.”⁵⁴ Although Park witnessed the corruption of the military firsthand, he took little action to prevent it. Kim Jong-pil assembled like-minded men and accosted his superiors.⁵⁵ In fact, Kim’s efforts to eliminate corruption in the general officer ranks preceded Park’s lukewarm suggests for reform.. Author Kim Chong-shin recalled what Park had told him in June of 1960:

During the immediate aftermath of the April Revolution in 1960, a meeting was held at Army Headquarters in Seoul. The participants were restricted to top generals above the level of corps commander. The purpose was to map out effective means to cope with the discontented young colonels who had stubbornly demanded retirement of the so-called “corrupted generals” from active duty. The “Rectification Movement” had been masterminded by the then-Lieutenant Colonel Kim Jong-pil. At the meeting, General Park proposed that all generals above the rank of major general resign voluntarily in order to pave the way for the junior officers. . . . However, his proposal received only cold and foolish retorts from other generals present.⁵⁶

Once again, Park suggested to his superiors that they should retire, but offered little more than talk. The character analysis presented should lead one to seriously question who was the driving force behind the coup, as well as the person capable of rallying officers to ensure its success.

The Realist versus the Idealist

Another source of evidence supporting Kim Jong-pil’s narrative is that many of the junta’s policies and early actions reflected Kim’s outlook as a realist. Park’s idealistic tendency was to attack corruption in whatever context.⁵⁷ For example, Park and his peers had strongly condemned corruption in the business world. Although the junta began arresting key businessmen for corruption after taking power, Kim opposed the action and took measures to slow the arrests. In a later interview, Kim stated, “I didn’t like the idea of blaming these businessmen for corruption because we needed to mobilize them to launch a strong economic drive for growth. We needed their cooperation.”⁵⁸ Kim Jong-pil was a realist who saw the necessity of pardoning some corrupt officials and businessmen in order to achieve the junta’s economic development goals.⁵⁹

Kim’s realist view is reflected in his founding of the KCIA, which was modeled off of its American counterpart. Kim recruited many of its first members, created its motto, and decided the agency should have investigative authority. Only after putting it all together did he brief Park on it, who simply “was satisfied.”⁶⁰ The agency is now infamous for its rough tactics against the public, including arrests without due process and

violent interrogations, which was suggested to have happened under Park's direct orders or approval. However, the primary record remained clear in these areas, as evidenced by a cable from the U.S. Embassy in Seoul that implied the excesses of the KCIA were Kim's doing, against Park's desires⁶¹:

Further source of danger to stability of government . . . arises from activities of Kim Jong-pil and ROKCIA. . . . Practice of midnight arrest and reports of strong-arm methods to extract confessions still occur with sufficient frequency to maintain atmosphere of insecurity and fear. . . . Park and Supreme Council have taken steps to deal with this fear. . . . Park is aware that Kim Jong-pil is capable of excesses arising from his exuberance for power and his inexperience.⁶²

In contrast, Park's response to the protests associated the student movement of 1960 highlighted his idealism. Author Kim Chong-shin recounted Park's service as martial law commander in Busan:

The demonstrations on April 19 were so well-organized and massive that even the well-trained police and political hoodlums of the Liberal regime proved helpless. The only resort left for them was to proclaim nation-wide martial law that very afternoon. Army Chief of Staff Song Yo-chan was appointed Commanding General of the Forces Enforcing the Martial Law, while General Park was assigned as local chief of the Enforcement Headquarters in the Busan area. But this turned out to be a fatal mistake by the government and Army leaders in the capital, who probably counted on General Park's outspoken honesty and patriotism to carry out their wishes: indiscriminate suppression of demonstrators, students or adult citizens. General Park had no intention whatsoever to cooperate with the corrupt government leaders. Instead he believed that it was not right for him to suppress the "justifiable grievances" of the honest students and citizens. Following the proclamation of martial law, he secluded himself in the Headquarters of the Logistics Command and

remained silent.⁶³

Here, and throughout the book, Kim Chong-shin did not hide his political slant. Even so, Park's failure to respond to orders reflected his idealism and his agreement with the demonstrators' opinions. In a more overt act days later, Park addressed a group of protesters by standing on the hood of a Jeep and saying "I can assure you that the officers and men, including myself, who have assembled here are on your side."⁶⁴ He then secluded himself in his headquarters. On the rare occasion he took action, it was limited and did not affect significantly affect the demonstrations.

The Faction Leader versus the Quiet General

Lastly, the differing leadership styles of the two men prior to and shortly after the coup further support Kim Jong-pil's account of the military revolution. Kim was a proven agitator, capable of drawing people to his side, while Park was a quiet leader who, though well respected, avoided controversy or dishonorable actions.

As noted, Kim was seldom reluctant to pursue bold and aggressive moves to support his agenda. He assembled the group of officers to accost General Chae Yeong-hi and demanded the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff resign. He also assembled similarly sized groups to protest against corrupt and incompetent leadership in the military, actions for which he was arrested twice. Time and again, Kim showed he was capable of attracting his peers to his cause. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Kim's faction of field grade officers quickly became a powerful force within the SCNR.

Although much of the literature of the coup suggests that Kim and Park were co-leaders of the same faction, the primary evidence suggests otherwise. By June 15, voting patterns within the SCNR seemed to "reveal three primary groupings, with most junior officers looking to Lt. Col. Kim Jong-pil for leadership. . . . As SCNR members are presently identified, Park is supported by 15, Kim by 10, and the SCNR chairman Lt. Gen. Chang Do-Young by 5."⁶⁵ Moreover, there were strong suggestions of a split between Park and Kim and his colonels faction. Regarding the colonels, a U.S. Government report of the period stated, "There is a group of some 10 or 12 members of the junta—most of them Colonels—who provided much of the coup's initial impetus and planning and who probably differ with Park on junta policies. In general, these officers tended to favor drastic measures to achieve their objectives and suppress

opposition. Park indicated he intended to curb the influence of the Colonels.”⁶⁶ Another report questioned Kim’s support of Park suggesting,

Lt. Col. Kim Jong-pil is a leader of the impatient reform-minded younger element. As the head of the recently formed central intelligence agency, Kim has been moving to consolidate in police-state fashion all security affairs under his and presumably Park’s control. However, his loyalty to Park is uncertain. Inasmuch as some of Park’s strongest support has come from the younger officer group, an attempt to reduce their power could precipitate a bitter and possibly violent power struggle within the junta.⁶⁷

The idea that Kim could turn against Park is present in other records of the period. A CIA intelligence estimate stated Kim “could become a rival [of Park’s] . . . Park may be sufficiently adroit to accomplish [curbing the influence of the faction] without causing the Colonels to turn against him. . . . If such a break occurred, the outcome would depend on whether Kim chose to support Park” or the colonels.⁶⁸

Despite the common argument in the literature that Park manipulated the junta’s factions to establish his own power, the primary record seems to suggest that Kim also sought to marginalize other factions. A cable from the U.S. Embassy suggested that

. . . there is evidence traditional propensity for factionalism is asserting itself inside the Supreme Council. Most serious case occurred during September and first week of October when bitter internal power struggle was initiated by Kim Jong-pil, Director ROKCIA, and some young Colonels, aimed at purging Generals from Hamgyong province. But there is also evidence that Chairman Park and others are determined to prevent this.⁶⁹

As discussed, Kim was much more politically active and radical than Park. In a junta fractured by age, commissioning source, geography, and ideology, his faction’s radical political views became the primary source of disagreement among junta members. This was especially true after

Lieutenant General Chang Do-young and his supporters were removed, leaving only the fiery junior officers and the conservative generals.

In contrast, Park spent his adult life within a rigid hierarchical system. In his early years, Park was a student in two Japanese colonial schools that were run according to strict, if not authoritarian, standards. His second school, the Taegu Normal School, was militaristic in its methodology and lifestyle. Park abandoned a teaching career, graduated near the top of his class at the Manchurian Military Academy, studied at the Japanese Military Academy, and served as a first lieutenant in the Imperial Manchurian Army. Returning to Korea, he immediately joined the nascent ROK Army. Park lived his life in an environment where authority was absolute. When Park opposed orders—whether to deliver military votes or suppress student demonstrators—he did so subtly and within the system.

Conclusion

Kim Jong-pil's interviews with the *Korea JoongAng Daily* provide historians with rich insight into the motivations of the two principal agents of the May 16th Military Revolution. At the time the interview began, the 89-year old Kim had been out of politics for a decade. The “Park Chung-hee Boom”—in which public thought drifted towards an idealistic view of Park, his regime, and its attendant economic growth—had receded, seemingly a relic of the late 1990s and the Asian economic crisis. Public opinion had shifted against Park, fueled in part by negative perceptions of his daughter's presidency. In giving the interviews and making his claims, Kim only risked damaging his reputation and legacy by trying to supplant Park as the architect of the coup, or by suggesting that he was responsible for the harsher authoritarianism of the junta. In short, Kim Jong-pil had little to gain for claiming a larger role in the military revolution.

While it is widely suggested that Park schemed and manipulated his way to power before, during, and after the May 16 coup, it is rarely suggested that anyone else could have been capable of the same. The initial records of the military revolution, written in Park's name but likely the product of others on his behalf, placed him at the center of events. Subsequent independent, academic, and biographical works addressed the contributions of others, including Kim Jong-pil. Scholars working under President Chun Doo-hwan returned Park to the center, but focused on the negative aspects of his lengthy time in office. This was followed by the publications across popular genres that reflected a nostalgia for the leader who oversaw the development of the Korean economy. The “Park Chung-

hee Boom” of the late 1990s shaped public perception and influenced subsequent research into the agency of Park and his fellow conspirators.

This latter research frequently downplays Kim Jong-pil’s role in conceiving, planning, and executing the coup. Focusing on Park’s legacy, many recent works ignore Kim’s reputation for joining and splitting political factions that he demonstrated for over 50 years on the national stage. In light of his recent interviews, in which he professes to have masterminded the coup and manipulated many of the significant political decisions during the toppling of the Second Republic, it is important to reassess what is known about the military revolution and who bears primary responsibility.

In light of this evidence and the analysis presented in this paper, Kim Jong-pil’s claims to have had a greater role in conceiving, planning, and executing the coup d’état have merit and warrant additional research. This is particularly so at the early stages of the revolution; i.e., the critical months in the winter and spring of 1961. Park’s eventual leadership of the SCNR and government does not necessarily mean that he was the revolution’s sole agent. Indeed, other military officers and units played critical roles in the coup. Rather, Kim Jong-pil’s recollections provides historians with new information on one of the key figures of the revolution. It is certainly worth revisiting the traditional narrative and examining Kim’s claims, given the period’s relevance in the culture and politics of Korea.

Notes:

¹ Choe, Sang-hun. “Kim Jong-pil, Political Kingmaker in South Korea, Dies at 92.” *The New York Times*. June 23, 2018, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/23/obituaries/kim-jong-pil-south-korea.html>.

² *The Park Chung Hee Era [Kindle Edition]*, Byung-kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel, eds (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011): Location 932.

³ Yong-sup Han’s essay “The May Sixteenth Military Coup,” which can be found in *The Park Chung Hee Era (2011)*, is one of the most detailed summaries of the coup, but it lacks sufficient citation and relies overwhelmingly on Cho Gab-je’s work rather than primary sources.

⁴ “Former Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil dies.” *The Korea Herald*. Jun 23, 2018

⁵ *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea [Kindle Edition]*, Location 932.

⁶ Gregg Andrew Brazinsky noted that “In a telegram entitled ‘The State, Revolution and I—A Revealing Book by Pak Chonghui,’ 1 September 1963, the American ambassador to South Korea Phillip Habib refers to widespread doubts about the authorship of the book”

(“From Pupil to Model: South Korea and American Development Policy During the Early Park Chung Hee Era,” *Diplomatic History* 29, No. 1 (Jan 2005): 87, note 16).

⁷ For example journalist Kim Chong-Shin, in his book *Seven Years with Korea's Park Chung Hee*, stated “As I learned later, the plan for a military revolution led by General Park and his supporters had already been in the making by the time he read his celebrated funeral address at the Bomo Temple [April 23, 1960]. Unfortunately or fortunately, the Liberal regime was overthrown by the uprisings of the heroic students in April, forcing the military revolutionaries to wait for another year” (34). It is not exactly clear where Kim learned this, but based on his sourcing in the rest of the book, one very plausible source was the propaganda books published by the junta in Park’s name. What is clear is that he learned about it only after Park was fully in power and the junta’s messaging machine was in full-swing.

⁸ Kim Se-jin, “The Politics of Military Revolution in Korea,” (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p. 86.

⁹ Kim Se-jin, 92.

¹⁰ Kim Se-jin, p. 79.

¹¹ Kim Se-jin, p. 92.

¹² Kim Se-jin, p. 92.

¹³ The KCIA’s illegal fundraising was subsequently known as the “Four Major Cases of Grave Suspicion.” The *Hanguk Ilbo* presented a detailed study of this case in its September 25, 1963 edition, cited in Se-Jin Kim, pp. 115-6.

¹⁴ James F. Durand, “General Shin Hyun-joon: Father of the Marine Corps,” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Volume XXI, Number 2 (Fall/Winter 2017), pp. 135-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁶ Seungsook Moon, “The Cultural Politics of Remembering Park Chung Hee,” *The Asia Pacific Journal – Japan Forum*, Volume 7, Issue 19, Number 5 (May 9, 2009), p. 2. Available online <https://apjff.org/-Seungsook-Moon/3140/article.html>.

¹⁷ Moon, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Kim, Jin-kook, “Chong Wa Dae Opens Park Chung-hee's Diary,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, May 14, 2000. Available online at <http://mengnews.joins.com/amparticle/1877101>.

²² Yong-sup Han, “The May Sixteenth Military Coup,” *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, Byung-kook Kim and Ezra Vogel, editors, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 35.

²³ Han, p. 42.

²⁴ Han, p. 56.

²⁵ There are several errors in the numbering of the English language articles on the paper’s website. For example, there are two articles listed as the fourth in the series, and the 16th article is omitted. There are also longer, non-serialized articles that address specific topics; e.g., Kim Jong-pil’s Relationship with Kim Young-Sam..”

²⁶ For an examination of the public memory of the Park era see Moon, Seongsok. "The Cultural Politics of Remembering Park Chung Hee," *The Asia Pacific Journal* 7, No. 5 (May 2009).

²⁷ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, "The night the coup began and Park got shot at," *Kim Jong-pil Remembers* Vol. 10, *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 26, 2015.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, "Fortune teller sees future, gets it right," *Kim Jong-pil Remembers* Vol. 7, *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 11, 2015.

³⁰ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, "Planning a 'Revolution' in Only 90 Days," *Kim Jong-pil Remembers* Vol. 4, *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 18, 2015.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, "Plans for Revolution Take Place Quietly," *Kim Jong-pil Remembers* Vol. 6, *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 16, 2015.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Yong-sup Han even suggests, based on Cho Kap-Che's account, that "Park may have thought of the coup when he was under General Yi Yong-Mun as early as 1952" (*The Park Chung Hee Era*, Chapter 2, Endnote 7). Such an idea seems exceedingly unlikely, as this would not only have been in the middle of the Korean War, and didn't fit Park's character or station at the time. Citing the same source, Han also suggests "When Park Chung Hee was assigned to the post of commander of logistics in Busan, he discussed the coup with his colleagues . . . after observing the government's illegal election campaign on March 15, 1960" (*Ibid.*, Endnote 8). This also seems unlikely since, as will be discussed in this paper, Park's reluctance to follow the military leadership's rigging of the election made him several high powered enemies. They were not only monitoring him, but looking for any way to take him down. Kim Chong-Shin noted that "The military leaders of the interim government employed every imaginable means to win General Park's loyalty, with only frustrating results. They met almost every day to find an effective solution to the ticklish problem, yet they could neither leave the question unanswered nor invent a plausible excuse to downgrade the general. Their final conclusion was to bury him in obscurity step by step" (81). It is evident from the above citations and many others that conflict with the primary record, that a serious analysis of Cho Kap-Che's work, his sources and evidence in particular, needs to be attempted. However that is beyond the scope of this paper. Regardless, it seems risky to base one's arguments solely on such a work, without additional primary support. As I will attempt to show, these arguments for an extended coup planning timeline don't seem to fit the primary evidence available to us.

³⁷ Kim Jong-Pil was the leader of the radical colonels faction which was the driving force of the revolution. Kim Chong-Shin wrote "It was the young but indignant colonels who organized the military *coup d'état* which overthrew the government of former Prime Minister John M. Chang [Chang Myon] in May, 1961" (303).

³⁸ "Memorandum From Director of Central Intelligence Dulles to President Kennedy," FRUS Vol. 22, Document 217, May 16, 1961.

³⁹ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, "The Promise that Park Didn't Keep," *Kim Jong-pil Remembers* Vol. 9, *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 24, 2015.

⁴⁰ Kim, Chong-Shin, *Seven Years with Korea's Park Chung Hee* (Seoul: HollyM Corporation, 1967): 95-98.

⁴¹ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, "Complacent Top Brass Allowed Coup to Proceed," Kim Jong-pil Remembers Vol. 8, *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 20, 2015.

⁴² Kim Chong-Shin recalled "I often saw [Park] approve military recommendations or hear classified reports from his staff officers. On many of these occasions I suggested that I should leave, but he would usually insist on my company" (18). It is hard to fathom how a reporter could ever have been allowed into classified meetings, especially in a country with deadly-serious security issues like the ROK at the time. No modern, well-trained military would ever allow such a breach of operational security.

⁴³ "Junta Defies U.N. on Troop Mutiny," *The Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 1961.

⁴⁴ FRUS Vol. 22, Document 223.

⁴⁵ "Korean Junta Told of U.S. Friendly Ties," *The Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1961.

⁴⁶ Park, 100-101.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Telegram From the Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (Magruder) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Lemnitzer), in Paris" FRUS Vol. 22, Document 223, May 25, 1961.

⁴⁹ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, "Election Fixing Provoked Revolution," Kim Jong-pil Remembers Vol. 5, *Korea Joongang Daily*, March 13, 2015. – Regarding the letter, Kim Chong-Shin wrote "[Park's] recommendation must have been based on friendly advice and confidence and good wishes rather than malice . . . To [Song], General Park seemed perhaps the last person who should have ever recommended his resignation. On the contrary, he might have counted on the latter to take his side in any critical showdown" (p42). Kim's opinions on how Park was viewed by his peers and superiors hints at the man's reserved character and non-political behavior.

⁵⁰ Kim, 21-25

⁵¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵² Kim Chong-Shin describes such an argument he witnessed between Park and a certain Colonel P as follows: "General Park lifted his face resolutely to the insolent colonel. 'Don't ask me anymore,' he said. 'How on earth can I do such a thing? It is my duty to tell my officers and men to do the right things. Then how should I encourage them to be involved in the rigged election?' Then he looked straight into the eyes of the colonel. Colonel P straightened his position to attention, perhaps because he was intimidated by the stern gaze of General Park. 'What is the use of holding the election? I don't care whatever you do about it!' The general's voice became even colder and graver. It was not loud, but it was fierce enough, I thought, to crush even a rock. General Park's gaze remained for a moment on the colonel's face. Then suddenly he went to his table to grasp a bundle of ballot papers. He tore them into pieces and threw them into the oil stove" (29).

⁵³ FRUS Vol. 22, Document 223.

⁵⁴ FRUS Vol. 22, Document 244.

⁵⁵ This was not the last time Kim Jong-Pil was associated with aggressive insubordination. A memorandum from U.N. Commander Magruder to the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted that a week after the coup, Kim's faction of colonels also had "weakened the authority of their own commanders by the organization of

officers who are loyal to the coup group instead of their own commanders and who stay ready to act against their own commanders when they feel those commanders are taking action that would not be approved by the coup group” (FRUS Vol. 22, Document 223).

⁵⁶ Kim, 57.

⁵⁷ Kim Chong-Shin suggested that “Park was then rather idealistic than practical, which I suppose was quite natural for a soldier who was yet to become the President” (61).

⁵⁸ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, “How Revolution Discovered Its Need of Business,” Kim Jong-pil Remembers Vol. 20, *Korea Joongang Daily*, April 23, 2015.

⁵⁹ In *The Country, the Revolution, and I*, the author—presumably Park—argues “What would we do if U.S. aid were cut off tomorrow? . . . With a strong enemy across the 38th Parallel, this economic struggle takes precedence over combat or politics. . . . We have to accomplish, as quickly as possible, the goal of an independent economy. We must manage our own affairs as our own responsibility. Before May 1961 this was the primary objective which made me undertake the revolution” (29). Not only was it seen as necessary to build the economy, but also to utilize native businessmen to make it happen, in order to become economically independent.

⁶⁰ Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, “How the KCIA Was Born – In Deep Shadows,” Kim Jong-pil Remembers Vol. 15, *Korea Joongang Daily*, April 7, 2015.

⁶¹ For his part, Kim Jong-Pil suggested “To create a backbone of the revolutionary government, I thought there had to be at least one government institution that should be feared by the public” (Chun, Young-gi and Jin-kyu Kang, “How the KCIA Was Born – In Deep Shadows,” Kim Jong-pil Remembers Vol. 15, *Korea Joongang Daily*, April 7, 2015.)

⁶² FRUS Vol. 22, Document 244.

⁶³ Kim, 35-36.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁵ “Central Intelligence Weekly Summary,” dated June 15, 1961.

⁶⁶ “Special National Intelligence Estimate,” dated July 18, 1961. Also, FRUS Vol. 22, Document 236

⁶⁷ “Current Intelligence Weekly Summary,” dated July 6, 1961.

⁶⁸ “Special National Intelligence Estimate Number 42-3-61,” dated July 18, 1961.

⁶⁹ FRUS Vol. 22, Document 244.