

S E C R E T

Most sensitive

Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge

August 24, 1963

Rufus Phillips

Conversation with General Le Van Kim on 23 August 1963

1. The following are statements made to me by General Le Van Kim, currently acting as Deputy for Public Relations to General Don, during the course of a conversation with him on 23 August 1963. General Kim is an old personal friend and asked that this conversation be kept in the closest personal confidence.

2. General Kim opened the conversation by saying, bitterly, that the Army is now acting as the puppet of Counsellor Nhu, who tricked it into establishing martial law. The Army, including Generals Dinh and Don knew nothing of the plans to raid Xa Loi and the other pagodas. This was carried out by Colonel Tung's Special Forces and the Combat Police on Nhu's secret orders. Nhu is now in control and General Don is taking orders directly from him.

3. According to Kim, 1426 people (Buddhist monks and laymen) have been arrested. All of the explosives and arms found in the pagodas were planted. Now the population believes the Army was responsible for the repression of the Buddhists and is turning against the Army. Unless this situation is corrected and the people are told the truth, the Army will be seriously handicapped in its fight against the Communists.

4. General Kim said that students from the Faculties of Medicine and Pharmacy had held demonstrations in the morning of the 23rd. Kim felt these demonstrations were bound to spread, that the students were on the verge of violence. Riot control briefings had just been given to ARVN units leaders on the morning of the 23rd and he hoped violence between the Army and the students could be avoided. However, Nhu had ordered Cao Xuan Vy (Director General of Youth) to organize a massive demonstration of the Republican Youth involving over 500,000 people for the 25th of August. Kim believed that such a demonstration, if it could be organized, would produce a riot of unimaginable proportions and, therefore, must be avoided. He said he doubted that Nhu would listen to any contrary advice about the demonstration.

5. I asked Kim if the Army was united. He said that Nhu had deliberately split the command between Colonel Tung, General Dinh and General Don and was dealing with each separately. Don (who is his brother-in-law) does not command much natural support among the officer corps but most of

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TOP SECRET

Declassified at 30-year interval
Declassified after 30 years —

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the other generals and senior officers, he felt, could be rallied around him (Don). The key question was where did the U. S. stand. If the U. S. took a clear stand against the Nhu's and in support of Army action to remove them from the Government, the Army (with the exception of Colonel Tung) would unite in support of such an action and would be able to carry it out. He felt that retaining the President, even though he personally did not like him, would be preferable providing all Ngo family influence could be permanently and effectively eradicated. It was not just a question of getting rid of the Nhu's, he said, but of also removing their followers from the scene.

6. Finally, Kim said that he and seven other general officers had been obliged on 22 August to sign an oath of loyalty to President Diem which fully supported the actions taken by the Government against the Buddhists. He said the U. S. must not be fooled by this document, that the vast majority of the Army and most of the Generals who signed the document, did not approve of the repression of the Buddhists but had to sign at this time or expose themselves to individual elimination by Counsellor Nhu.

cc: Mr. Truheart

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