

8 September 1963

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Conversation with Minister of Defense Thuan

1. Late in the evening of 7 September, Rufus Phillips had a long conversation with Minister Thuan, at the latter's request. Since he did not have time to write a memorandum on the substance of the conversation prior to his departure at noon today, he reported it to me and requested that I write it. The paragraphs which follow report that conversation as repeated by Phillips.

2. Thuan opened the conversation by saying that he felt completely useless now. Nhu says that he has been bought by the Americans, and would certainly kill him if he tried to resign. Nevertheless, he said, he would like to resign, and would like to know if the Americans could arrange to get him out of the country if he decided to quit. He was told that the matter would be looked into.

3. According to Thuan, Nhu is now in effective control of the country. He is the only one whom the President trusts, and, in effect, the President has mentally abdicated in his favor. Ordinarily at meetings, Nhu speaks for the President, and the President gives assent; on other occasions the President simply repeats what Nhu has told him to say.

4. Both Nhu and the President are completely unrealistic about the progress of the war, in Thuan's opinion. Each has asked Thuan how long the country could last without U. S. assistance. His reply, he said, was that it might last for six months without other than military aid; but that a cut-off in military aid would precipitate an almost immediate collapse.

5. In this connection, Thuan recalled that in a recent conversation with Colonel Lac (Permanent Commissioner, Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets), the latter, in response to a question, said that in his opinion the present administration, if it continued in office, would lose the war in 1965. Lac went on to say that in his opinion, the GVN is losing the war in the Delta now. Thuan added that he was in full accord with Lac on the latter point.

6. Thuan said that several generals had been in contact with him, seeking his views on a coup d'etat. (He would not identify the generals.) He had refused to be drawn, not feeling sure that they were not acting as

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GROUP 4

Downgraded at 3-year intervals.
Declassified after 12 years.

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agents provocateurs. Thuan went on to say that in his opinion, General Dinh could definitely be "had," for an appropriate price in liquor, women, and cash.

7. Asked for his opinion about what the Americans should do, Thuan said he believed that they should cut off aid, as that would undoubtedly cause everyone to realize that they meant business. He stressed that personal loyalty to the President on the part of many of the officers was one of the major inhibiting factors -- but that all were looking to the Americans for leadership -- and that most could be expected to follow the American's lead.

8. Thuan also discussed the last meeting of the Interministerial Committee at which General Cao of IV Corps presented a briefing. Cao, he said, stressed that operations in the Delta area are improving, and that the troops are becoming more mobile there. He made three interesting points:

- a. The Civil Guard and SDC should not be given modern weapons, such as carbines.
- b. Factories for making "home-made" weapons should be established to arm the CG and SDC, so that the VC could not arm themselves from them; and
- c. The only thing that he needs to win in the Delta is more troops.

9. According to Thuan, Nhu proceeded to interpellate Cao, starting by asking how many static defense posts there now are in the Delta. "2301, sir" said Cao. "Isn't that more than there were six months ago?" "Yes, sir," said Cao. "How can you then say that the troops are more mobile now?" said Nhu. There was no answer. Nhu went on to ask how the CG and SDC could be expected to be effective with "home-made" weapons, if they were unable to defend themselves with modern weapons? Receiving no answer, he then asked if more and better strategic hamlets were being built, as Cao said, and therefore presumably releasing more troops from static defense duties, why force levels were steadily rising, and even more troops being sought by Cao. Again, there was no answer.

10. Asked directly if he believed Nhu was on the verge of taking overt action to eliminate ministers or Americans, or to establish a rapprochement with the DRV, Thuan said that he did not think there was any serious danger at this time, since Nhu is so well satisfied with the way things are going. He added, however, that Nhu was perfectly capable of any or all of these measures, and might well resort to them if he felt pressed. In his view, the Americans would do well to prepare for these contingencies.

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11. As a closing comment, Thuan said that virtually all work has stopped in the ministries in Saigon. He cited as an example, a recent visit by the Minister of National Economy, carrying a detective novel. Queried by Thuan, the Minister said, in substance: "All we, or anybody else, do in the office is to read these. We are waiting."

COMMENT:

Thuan was very obviously deeply disturbed by the present situation, convinced that it can only be resolved by American leadership, and equally convinced that he is helpless to do anything. This last is almost certainly correct.

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