

SECRET

The Ambassador

September 5, 1963

Rufus Phillips

Conversation with Denis Warner, Australian Correspondent, on 5 September

1. Denis Warner, who is an extremely well-connected and knowledgeable Australian correspondent, told me the following on 5 September 1963.
2. Warner had a four hour conversation with Tran Van Khien, Madame Nhu's brother, on 31 August. Khien told Warner that Nhu had completely fabricated the case about American involvement with the Buddhists based on documents supposedly "captured" at Xa Loi Pagoda. Among the documents was a story on the Buddhist situation written by Warner himself and stolen from the desk where he had been writing it in John Mecklin's house. Khien transmitted to Warner a request from Madame Nhu that Warner explain why he had written this story. Otherwise he (Warner) would be arrested. Warner said he had no intention of explaining anything and intended to leave on 5 September before his latest articles or his book (now being sold in the U. S.) caught up with him.
3. Khien's assessment of the situation to Warner was that the Americans were weak and would do nothing. The main problem was that Nhu himself was the greatest evil in Vietnam and had, somehow, to be eliminated so that Khien and his sister (Madame Nhu) could run the Government. According to Khien, Nhu had systematically used Thien to corrupt all the key ministers and this was how Nhu controlled them. Vu Van Mau had not been arrested before leaving, he had simply been called back by Nhu who showed him his dossier to prevent him from talking once he left the country. Khien said that not only were the important ministers involved in rackets such as the sale of lottery tickets, but also in opium smuggling and high-class prostitution. Nhu had himself amassed a secret fund through the Can Lao Party of 300 million dollars deposited in foreign banks which he intended to use in case American Aid was cut off.
4. Khien said that Nhu had tried to implicate him in the Buddhist 'conspiracy' based on his (Khien's) friendship with Warner. However, Madame Nhu had managed to protect him. Khien went on to say that he was now building up his own secret police force, with money from his sister, and that he expected to take over the main security mission in Saigon-Cholon once martial law was lifted. Lt. Col. Phuoc, currently province chief in Vinh Long Province, would serve as his deputy. (Warner characterized Phuoc as a brutal, blood-thirsty opportunist) Khien then scribbled for Warner on a piece of

SECRET

DECLASSIFIED
EXEMPTED FROM AUTOMATIC DOWNGRADING AND
DECLASSIFICATION

S E C R E T

- 2 -

paper his "secret" assassination list of Americans. The first name on the list was "Col" Richardson, the second an indecipherable name of somebody from USOM, then John Mecklin and Col. Concin. Warner was unable to retain the list.

5. Warner said he warned Khieu that any direct action against Americans would bring the U. S. Marines into Saigon, that he, Warner, had served as a correspondent with the Marines in the Pacific after being a soldier in the toughest Division the Australians had, and there were no troops in the world more ferocious than the Marines. According to Warner, he told Khieu that it would take the Marines no more than three hours to wipe out every Vietnamese soldier in the city. This very much deflated Khieu's self-confidence, Warner said.

6. Warner went on to say that the German correspondent of "Der Spiegel" Magazine had had an incredible interview with Madame Nhu several days ago in which she had apparently voiced her innermost thoughts. Madame Nhu was now trying to keep the interview from being printed, but the "Der Spiegel" correspondent was going to print it anyway. (Suggest a major effort be made to get an advance copy of this - Neil Sheehan of UPI is probably the best source) Among other things, Madame Nhu had accused the Americans of being involved in an international conspiracy with the Communists to overthrow the government using the Buddhists. That if the Americans thought the Vietnamese would go on killing each other for "American edification" they were mistaken. That the GVN was ready to negotiate with the DRV at any time. That a number of Americans would be assassinated if any attempt was made to overthrow the government; among the first would be Col Richardson and a "Col Brady" (sic) at USOM.

7. Warner then said that apparently even Diem believed the "international conspiracy" business. Warner showed me an answer to a written question posed by him to Diem concerning responsibility for the Buddhist affair. In the written answer someone had answered in Diem's name to the effect that evidence of an international conspiracy involving the Americans and the Communists behind the Buddhists had definitely been uncovered in the Pagodas.

8. Warner's final comments were that he felt that if the Americans did not take a firm stand in Vietnam, all would be lost. We could expect further blasts from Madame Nhu through the Times of Vietnam, he said, and we must respond vigorously and categorically in public to such accusations or we would completely lose the confidence of the Vietnamese people. If we kept our nerve and demonstrated our guts and principles, Warner said, the Nhu's were certain to collapse. Warner said that he had made his opinion known to the Australian Ambassador, Mr. Hill.

cc: Mr. Truchant
Mr. Richardson
Mr. Mecklin

S E C R E T