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MEMORANDUM

10 July 1963

TO: The Ambassador
FROM: Rufus C. Phillips

SUBJECT: Conversation with Secretary Thuan on 9 July 1963
and Recommended Action

1. After discussing some problems concerning the movement of USOM supplies on the railroad, Thuan asked me how serious I thought the current political crisis was. I said I thought it was extremely serious, was growing steadily worse, and I did not at present see how it was going to end in anything but an upheaval. I then asked Thuan what his personal assessment of the situation was - friend to friend - and off the record. Thuan first said that whatever he said was to be considered as completely confidential and hoped that I would respect his confidence as an old friend.
2. Thuan then answered that the President had become completely a prisoner of his family. "I emphasize the word 'completely,'" he said. My next question was whether any member of the family gave the President an even partially true picture of the situation. He said - no, on the contrary, they underplayed the situation to the President and, moreover, that they did not themselves realize its seriousness.
3. The Nhüs, and particularly, he said, the Bishop, had such an inflated idea of their own importance that they had no conception of what people thought of them or of how they were hurting the President. The Bishop, he continued, had become completely medieval in his outlook and actions. He was mixing temporal power with religion in an unbelievable way. For instance, when he went out now in Hue he was always escorted by police with sirens blowing just like the President. Thuan said that many prominent Catholics had become entirely disgusted with Bishop Thuc. Some of his most offensive, yet well-known actions, concerned his business dealings, in particular the acquisition, as his personal property, of many large buildings in Saigon. All of this had been accomplished through Government favoritism.
4. Thuan said that he thought the Nhüs, particularly Mrs Nhu, had really gone out of their minds. Talking to Nhu was like talking to a sleep-walker. Nhu had no conception of reality. His attempts at manipulating the Republican Youth, while distributing photos of himself in a pose similar to that in which the President is shown, was "utter foolishness." Thuan said that was the only word he could think of to describe it. Mrs Nhu's description of the Solidarite as a vast popular movement in back of her was even more ridiculous. Thuan said that one danger in the present situation, not to be dismissed, was that Nhu himself might attempt his own "coup," swathed as he was in his delusions of grandeur.

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5. According to Thuan, several people have tried to tell the President the truth but he would not listen. He is completely deaf to any mention of the actions of members of his family. Thuan said that he had, therefore, come to the conclusion that the President was going to let the family ruin him and that nobody could do anything to prevent it. The Government was, therefore, doomed - it was only a question of when, unless some miracle occurred.
6. I asked Thuan what would happen in case of an overthrow of the Government. Thuan said - "The end of Vietnam. It will be chaos." I asked if he thought there was anyone who could replace the President and he said "Frankly, no one." I said I had the impression that certain groups were already preparing for a splintering of Vietnam into factions. He answered, "Of course, what else?"
7. My next question was about what could be done, what measures might be taken which would have at least some chance of successfully avoiding chaos. Thuan replied that he thought the most useful measure would be to bring General Lansdale back, but the time was not yet ripe. The President didn't really feel the situation was serious, so he might not listen at this point - even to General Lansdale. The ace card would then have been played. I asked Thuan how he proposed to estimate when was the 'right time' since almost any time could be too late with the situation getting more and more out of control. He agreed that almost any time could be too late and that perhaps General Lansdale should be asked to come out immediately. He said he would discuss the recall of General Lansdale with you as soon as you got back since he knew you would understand the reasons for recalling him and would not let personal feelings interfere with your judgment.
8. He then said he was most anxious to see you and that he particularly wanted to know what the situation was in Washington.
9. Comments and Recommendations. As previously stated, Thuan asked me not to reveal his comments to anyone else because of their sensitivity. For this reason I have confined this information to you, with the exception of indicating to Bill Trueheart that Thuan appeared very pessimistic about the outcome of the current crisis, did not feel he was getting through to the President, and also that he had mentioned to me the idea of recalling General Lansdale but was concerned that the timing be right.

I don't know what Thuan will tell you. He is, of course, fighting for his own survival, and I have the impression that he has ambivalent feelings about bringing someone back who may uncover the full extent of what has been going on in the Palace and whom he cannot personally influence as much as someone with a more restricted circle of contacts. I do not believe that his opinions, one way or the other, should be a determining factor in deciding on General Lansdale's return.

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- 3 -

The events of the last few days only tend to confirm, in my own mind, the recommendations made to Bill Truett in my memorandum of 5 July concerning the recall of General Lansdale. Even if events have passed the stage at which President Diem can be saved, which many seem to feel is the case but of which I am not entirely convinced, General Lansdale's presence here would still be of the utmost value. If the U.S. is forced to somehow help put together a new government, there is no one else more qualified to assist with such a task. No one else exists, in my considered opinion, who has the necessary degree of personal confidence and respect from all the parties involved which is required to create a satisfactory replacement for the present government. To depend almost entirely upon the Vietnamese to accomplish this task themselves, which is what I predict will happen unless General Lansdale is recalled, is to greatly increase the risks of chaos over what they might otherwise be.

One last thought about assignment - if you do make the decision to request General Lansdale's recall, I would suggest that he be assigned as a Special Assistant to the Office of the Ambassador to work directly for you under your supervision.

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