

Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge

August 24, 1963

Rufus Phillips

Conversation with Nguyen Dinh Thuan on 24 August 1963

1. I received a call from Secretary Thuan on the evening of 23 August. He said he had been trying to reach me for two days, that he wanted to see me as soon as possible and wanted me to come for breakfast on the morning of the 24th. Thuan is a personal friend whom I first got to know in 1955 and with whom I have maintained a relatively close relationship since. I do not entirely trust his personal motives at present because his honesty has been too thoroughly compromised (in contrast to Vo Van Hai, the President's Secretary) by his past association and cooperation with Counsellor Nhu and Nhu's proteges, especially Dr. Tuyen. (Thuan once confided to me that he had been obliged to cooperate in "everything" with Tuyen in order to remain in the Palace). However, much of what he had to say this morning had the ring of truth about it.

2. Thuan said that he had decided not to resign but to stick with the President a while yet for three reasons: his personal feelings of loyalty to Diem, the fact that a small split had developed between Diem and the Nhu's and for the safety of his family (his family is now all in Saigon). Thuan said that the President had sent Madame Nhu, on 23 August, on his own volition (Thuan took no direct credit for it) a letter in which he ordered her to make no public statements and give no press conferences. The President also instructed General Oai and the Director General of Information not to print any statement she might make. Both Counsellor and Madame Nhu were "furious," according to Thuan.

3. Thuan conceded that it would be difficult to split the Nhu's off from the President but he felt strongly that the U. S. should attempt this. He said he could see no alternative to the President as a leader for Vietnam, no one else was as widely respected, or would be generally acceptable within Vietnam. Thuan felt that the U. S. had to exercise leadership and must be very firm, otherwise chaos was likely to result. Under no circumstances, he said, should the U. S. acquiesce in what the Nhu's had done. This would be disastrous.

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4. Thuan went on to say that Nhu was in a dangerously triumphant mood. Nhu believed himself in full control of the situation and was contemptuous of the Americans. Thuan said that Nhu had been very successful in tricking the Army (in answer to a direct question he said that the Generals did not know beforehand of the planned raid on Xa Loi, nor did he), and in dividing it into three commands. However, he felt that Nhu had very little real support in the Army and that the Army would turn firmly against Nhu if it knew that the U. S. would under no circumstances support a Government with the Nhu's in control.

5. Thuan also said that the U. S. must not be afraid of leaving the door open to the Communists, by withdrawing support from the Government as long as it contained the Nhu's. He reiterated that the U. S. had to be firm. If it was, the Army would respond.

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