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DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
THE DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

TO : The Secretary  
FROM : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *tlh*  
SUBJECT: The Problem of Nhu

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BY *J.N.M.* NAME, DATE *7/7/78*

Ngo Dinh Nhu has played a key role in prosecuting the war against the Viet Cong. He has been the dynamic force behind the strategic hamlet program. He has significantly influenced the reorientation of Vietnamese military concepts from conventional to counter guerrilla warfare. He has developed mass organizations to infuse the youth and others with political consciousness.

Since May 8, however, Nhu has become the primary factor exacerbating the Buddhist controversy and is the cause of a potentially explosive governmental crisis. For the reasons listed below, he is the major obstacle to any genuine resolution of this crisis.

His Hold on Diem

Nhu exercises an overriding, immutable influence over Diem. He has discredited, neutralized, or caused the removal of many competent and loyal advisors to Diem. Nguyen Dinh Thuan, Secretary of State for the Presidency, claims Nhu is the only person whom Diem trusts. Vo Van Hai, chief of Diem's private cabinet and the most reliable authority on the inner workings of the Presidency, agrees with Thuan that Nhu speaks for Diem at meetings, writes Diem's responses to press queries, and has reduced Diem to echoing his own views.

As a result Diem believes Nhu's charge that the Buddhist problem is basically Viet Cong created. This has degraded Diem in the eyes of his loyal supporters. Vu Van Mau, former Foreign Minister, and General Le Van Kim, deputy acting chief of the armed forces, claim Nhu is now the dominant power in South Vietnam. Our Country Team assessment concludes that at top echelons of government as well as at among provincial and district officials, the consensus is that actual power rests with Nhu rather than Diem. Moreover the assessment points to the spreading conviction that Diem is unwilling to dismiss Nhu, with some groups doubting Diem is even able to rule any longer without him.

Nhu's Independent Power: Secret Police and Special Forces

Nhu also has independent sources of power. He directs the secret police and the Can Lao, the semicovert political control organization. This apparatus of informants permeates bureaucratic, military, and key non-governmental groups. Nhu's surveillance system generates fear and hatred throughout these groups. His power to discredit opponents has led to the removal of competent and dedicated personnel.

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Nhu controls the army's Special Forces which, together with the secret police, act as his agents in raids on pagodas, arrests of monks, students, and oppositionists, and the manufacture of "evidence" to "prove" the Communist conspiracy behind these disaffected groups. It is such actions which have exacerbated existing tensions to the point of near revolt.

#### His Hatred of the United States

Nhu has conducted a virulent public and private anti-American campaign. He has accused the United States of plotting with "colonialists" and "feudalists" to turn South Vietnam into a satellite. He has spread reports that specific United States officials are marked for assassination. He has frequently claimed that the American presence must be reduced because it threatens South Vietnam's independence. He has repeatedly lied to our Ambassador and the CAS station chief concerning his role in developments since May 8.

This has impaired our position in South Vietnam. Colonel Lac, responsible for implementing the strategic hamlet program, claims that progress has slowed in the last three months because of the anti-American attitude of "certain elements" in Saigon. At the same time, Nhu's boast that he commands the basic support of the United States both inhibits his opponents and expands his prestige by humiliating our high officials.

#### His Relations With North Vietnam

Nhu has claimed privately that should United States aid be cut he would seek help elsewhere. Should that fail, Nhu asserts he would negotiate a settlement with Hanoi. Nhu has convinced both Vietnamese and foreign observers that such a prospect is likely. Reports that Nhu is already in contact with Hanoi are so credible and widespread as eventually to undermine morale in the army and the bureaucracy, regardless of their current accuracy.

Nhu is capable of believing he could manipulate the situation to his advantage, whether through fighting or negotiating with the communists. His megalomania is manifest in his claim that only he can save Vietnam. Both Nguyen Dinh Thuan and Vo Van Hai testify to Nhu's opium smoking during the past two years, providing at least partial explanation for his excess of self-confidence and fantasies of power.

#### The Vietnamese Want Nhu Out

According to General Harkins, both sentiment and reality in South Vietnam have polarized strongly and properly against the Nhus. He believes that the country would "survive and flourish" with them gone and Diem still President. We concur fully in General Harkins' view, of the Nhus.

General Krulak reports that Nhu's departure would be hailed by military officers. He was told by the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade Commander of strong

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dissatisfaction with Nhu. Colonel Lac indicated that Nhu would not last 24 hours if the United States made clear it would not tolerate this situation. Tran Quoc Buu, head of the largest labor organization in Vietnam, claims that his followers believe Nhu must go. He fears that should Nhu emerge victorious from the present crisis, worse blunders will ensue, permitting an eventual Communist takeover. Vo Van Hai believes that Diem cannot regain the confidence of his people so long as Nhu remains.

We agree with the Country Team assessment that (1) Nhu is disliked, hated, feared, or distrusted at all levels in the bureaucracy, the military establishment and urban elite circles, and (2) longstanding and widespread anti-Nhu feelings have now intensified and crystallized into blame for the regime's repressive measures. We also agree with the MACV assessment that many top level military officers seem convinced that he could deal with Hanoi and the "great bulk of the military cannot accept Nhu as leader of South Vietnam under any conditions."

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