

DTR 2913

~~HIGGINS MARGUERITE~~  
JUDY'S PRESS CONTACTS~~SECRET~~

9 February 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Record

SUBJECT : Conversation with Marguerite Higgins on 8 February 1965; reference my previous memo

1. Marguerite Higgins prefaced our discussion with the statement that she will be bringing out a book on South Vietnam to be published by Harpers in September 1965. She intends to begin her study of that country from a time period beginning on 8 May 1963, leaving aside history and subject matter prior to that date.

2. During our talk, it was clear that Higgins will zero in on U. S. government policy relating to communications between Washington and Saigon dating about 24 August and in the time span immediately thereafter. From her comments, it seems evident that her two primary Vietnamese sources in Washington are Ambassador Khiem and Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao. She said that Khiem had told her that United States government representatives had assured the anti-Diem generals of a several hundred-thousand dollar payment to encourage them in action against Diem. I responded that Khiem's information had no validity whatsoever. I don't know whether my assurance will result in eliminating this item from Higgins' story but I, at least, did what I could.

3. Higgins outlined a description of background developments in Washington about that time which I suppose is fairly current in government circles. In her mind, Roger Hilsman is the villain of the piece, disastrous to American national interests. She said he had originated "the cable"; President Kennedy, absent at Hyannisport, had been provided with a double talk gist over the telephone; Mr. McCone was away from Washington; McNamara had felt inadequately consulted; and so on. I

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told Higgins that I could not comment on her rendition of developments at this point and managed to evade discussion. She said she had heard that Lodge and Harkins had cabled back to Washington to the effect that they did not know whether the Vietnamese generals really wished to proceed and that they felt soundings of the generals would be necessary in order to verify the intentions of this military leadership. I responded to the effect that I was not aware of any communications of this nature from Saigon, that Ambassador Lodge had held communications on a very tight and private basis. Higgins commented that I did not seem to have shared in Lodge's confidences and I said that I had felt myself in a position no different from the rest of the mission staff. I added that Ambassador Lodge, in those days, was seeing a good deal of the Italian Ambassador and the Papal Nuncio in an effort to assess the situation and to get on with his mission objectives.

4. Another of Higgins' targets may be political counselor Manfull, who, she says, refuses to recognize the present and potential danger represented by Tich Tri Quang and the men around him. She did not describe her proposed treatment of Lodge and the conduct of his mission, but I assume that he will be another target. She asked me about Starnes' attack and who we thought was behind it. I said that we had never been able to figure out which individual or individuals were the sources of Starnes' material. Higgins answered to the effect that she is convinced Lodge is the source because this had been his modus operandi in the past and she had seen him try the same thing with respect to General Harkins. I answered that it was unnecessary for an Ambassador to use means of this kind since a simple request through official channels for the recall of an Agency official was sufficient when it came from an Ambassador or Chief of Mission. This comment made, in my opinion, no impression on Higgins.

5. Higgins had learned from Fritz Nolting that the only way, in those days, to inhibit chronic tendencies toward a coup d'etat was to express clear-cut support of Diem and to say "no" when approached by Vietnamese on the question of action against the government. Nolting had told Higgins that, once you stop saying "no", you implicitly encourage factions interested in coup d'etat. At the very least, you open the door. She asked whether I thought Nolting's point was valid and I said that I did. Higgins had put together, along with everything else she has heard, President Kennedy's statement about the need for changes in policy and possibly personnel on the Vietnamese side, the Voice of America broadcast of 26 August, and the curtailment of our commodity import program.

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6. Higgins said that she had heard the generals had not wanted to undertake a coup d'etat and had to be persuaded by American representatives. I replied to the effect that, in my opinion, the generals had become increasingly concerned about the state of affairs in Vietnam during the period dating from 8 May. Their concern had been ambivalent -- an irritability about Buddhist impairment of the war effort and of the requirements of public order; but on the other hand, a sympathy with aspects of the Buddhists' claim against the Diem administration. The world-wide outcry of public opinion against the invasion of the pagodas on 21 August had contributed greatly to crystallization of a growing tendency toward undertaking seizure of power for themselves. Consequently, impetus for a change in the power structure had come from the generals. If they had hesitated, it was not because they needed to be persuaded by American representatives but because they had not felt ready for effective and successful action against the Diem administration.

7. Higgins said that Ambassador Khiem and Colonel Thao had informed her that General Duong van Minh had been most reluctant to enter into the action against Diem and had come in only at the last moment. I told Higgins that I did not feel this version to be historically accurate. Minh had been dissident for several years and had been a central participant among the generals in the final campaign against Diem. Khiem had also told Higgins that Colonel Thao had been central and I said that my impression was that Thao had been very active but was actually on the periphery of several conspiratorial circles and a go-between.

8. Finally, Miss Higgins argued rather tenaciously in support of her thesis that the Laos/South Vietnam border could be effectively sealed. I said that I considered this objective impossible to attain and expressed the view that efforts to contain the border would not be sufficiently successful to represent a significant factor toward changing the strategic equation in our favor.

9. It seems evident that a good portion of Higgins' book will deal with Tich Tri Quang. She may belabor our government and its representatives for having harbored him in the Embassy and for having failed, in her eyes, to recognize the central danger she believes he represents.

10. I did not ask her how she intended to treat any of the American figures who participated in these developments nor did she volunteer

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specifically what she intended to say. She had sounded negative on Hilsman, Lodge and Manfull. I told her former State Secretary Thuan was in town and suggested that she might want to obtain his views. I have no doubt that she will follow up on this. I asked whether she had talked with Trueheart and she said that she "just couldn't bear to do so." I interpreted this to mean that she is quite negative on Trueheart also. I did not ask her whether she intended to discuss the Agency but I have no reason to feel that she is unfriendly toward us, probably the contrary.

  
JOHN RICHARDSON  
Deputy Director of Training

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