

# South Vietnam and the American Press

Interview 21 April 1981

For Vietnam: A Television History

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**[SYNC]Interviewer:** What was Diem's— are you rolling?

**[SYNC]Ton-That:** No, not 1961. I was there in '63 because I left in '59. I was in close touch with Mr. Nhu ...and the government, but I was not there in '61.

**[SYNC]Interviewer:** What mistakes did Diem make? You were there in the 1963 Buddhist crisis. What mistakes did Diem make during the 1963 Buddhist crisis?

**[SYNC]Ton-That:** Well, I think the mistake made by Diem all through these years as by all the other Vietnamese politicians is never to have understood what, as my nephew says, what makes America tick. They did not understand America at all. The constitution structure, the importance of the press, opinion and all that. They never under...not...not one single Vietnamese, to my knowledge has understood that part, and from there, they made all kinds of mistakes. You see, ignoring the importance of opinion in the American political process.

**[SYNC]Interviewer:** Could you think of some example or an anecdote that illustrates this point?

**[SYNC]Ton-That:** Well, I can think of...let's see...ah...the typical case of Dr. Dan. When Dr. Dan was ejected from the national assembly in '59, I was still there. I was still press secretary to President Diem. I was disturbed. I was very disturbed. So, I went in...ah...I first saw Mr. Diem...

**[SYNC]Interviewer:** I'm sorry you're going to go into a story that will be way too complicated for us to tell.

**[SYNC] Interviewer:** Get into that element. For example, would you refer to her [Mme Nhu] statements, such as, describe you know, referring to the burning monks as barbecues, what did you do to try to ah ...

**[SYNC]Ton-That:** Well, since you mention this when she...

**[SYNC]Interviewer:** Would you mention her name because...

**[SYNC]Ton-That:** Mme. Nhu, that is, President Diem's ...brother, sister-in-law. I was interested in this so-called barbecue story. Mme. Nhu say that her kids picked it up in the what you call it, café. People were talking about barbecue. The kids brought that word home and she liked that. But, when she used this word in a telegram sent to I think, the New York Times she wanted me to send that telegram through my office because I had facilities for that, I refused. I said this is not the right thing to do and she got it sent by the Ministry of Information afterwards.

But, that's one part of it. Mme. Nhu is a spoiled child, as you like, and because she was the wife of Mr. Nhu, Mr. Diem could do little about it because out of consideration of his brother, he wouldn't want to meddle on, comment on, on his brother's wife. That I can understand that position. With President Diem it was a very difficult position there.

Now Monsignor Thuc who was listened to by practically everyone in the family, now unfortunately he tended to support Mme. Nhu in all that she did. And Mr. Nhu being Mme. Nhu's husband, although he got mad at her privately and he did that at least once in my presence.

Now, as insider I know that everyone was mad at Mme. Nhu except for Monsignor Thuc, but as Monsieur Nhu said 'everyone is kicking at my wife, you expect me to kick her also'? That's it, that sums up the position of the family in regard to Mme. Nhu.