



~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

EMBASSY
OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
New Delhi, India

126

May 18, 1967

The President
The White House

Dear Mr. President:

Although Viet-Nam is not my business and I know you are already over-burdened with free advice I would like again to take the liberty of expressing my private views directly to you on what I believe to be the critical situation which is developing there.

I do so, first, because many years of experience in Asia have given me some feeling for the forces which are shaping events there, and, second, because I feel that whether my views prove to be right or wrong they may be somewhat different from those which are normally aired within the Administration. I would like to make two points.

1. A few weeks ago I proposed to you a bold program of South Vietnamese land reform similar to the programs which have been so enormously effective in developing and maintaining political stability and economic dynamism in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. More specifically, I suggested that we bring to bear on the Saigon Government whatever pressures are required to persuade it to launch a program which would assure each rural family in South Viet-Nam twelve or fifteen acres of land. This could include those members of the Viet Cong who lay down their arms and sign an oath of allegiance before a certain date.

I recognize that there is opposition to such a proposal in Saigon and in Washington, not only on the grounds that it would upset some of our supporters in South Viet-Nam who are large land-holders, but also because it could not effectively be administered during war-time. However, as for the first objection the

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4

By SP1 JW, NARA, Date 3/4/94

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

COPY LBJ LIBRARY

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

-2-

Nationalist debacle on the Chinese mainland demonstrated we cannot create a stable Asia by catering to those who have a vested interest in an unjust status quo. As for the second, I have pointed out that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was launched under somewhat similar difficult circumstances; yet it was Lincoln's dramatic move which helped to give the Union cause meaning for a great many million people at home and abroad.

Since writing to you I have talked to several radio and newspapermen on their way home from Saigon who allege that when American and South Vietnamese troops take over a rural area from the Viet Cong in most cases the rights of the landlords are promptly restored, and in some cases there has even been an effort to collect a percentage of the crops as back rent.

I can say with the utmost conviction that if these stories are correct we can never succeed in "pacifying" the South Viet-Nam rural areas regardless of the size of our commitment or the dedication and ability of those who are carrying it out. The peasants of Asia want doctors, schools and roads; but even more they want the pride, dignity and economic justice that goes with land ownership.

2. My second point involves the matter of military manpower in Asia. In my view it is totally impossible to win a ground forces numbers game anywhere in Southeast or Eastern Asia. As I understand it, there are still 250,000 well-trained, well equipped North Vietnamese troops on the other side of the 17th Parallel which have not yet been committed. If new inputs of United States ground forces begin to turn the fighting sharply in our favor I am convinced that Hanoi will simply put in more and more of its own reserves to meet the challenge. And if eventually they run out of North Vietnamese soldiers it is inevitable, in my opinion, that they will then turn, however

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

-3-

reluctantly, to the Chinese who will have no alternative but to send in whatever "volunteers" may be necessary.

Many of our Chinese experts assert that under no circumstances will the Chinese enter the war. From my own knowledge of Asia I cannot agree. Indeed, we should be reminded that Chinese experts provided similar assurances in the 1950's in regard to Korea. Yet in that instance tough Chinese soldiers were introduced in large numbers in spite of the fact that the new Peking Government had been fighting a civil war for thirty years and the country was still woefully divided and impoverished.

I also believe that the current assumption that the Soviet Union under no circumstances will support Communist China is open to very serious question.

Moscow's quarrel is not with China but with Mao Tse-tung. With a 6000-mile border and 700 million hungry Chinese leaning against it, any government in Moscow will grasp the first opportunity for a rapprochement with Peking. Under conditions of peace this might be consistent with our national interests. Against a background of expanding warfare in Viet-Nam it could lead straight to a world disaster.

At luncheon a few days ago Radivoj Uvalic, the able and well informed Yugoslav Ambassador in New Delhi, told me that his government was deeply worried by Brezhnev's recent speech in Bulgaria and reports from Moscow indicating that there is increasing support within the Soviet Government for a more moderate attitude towards China.

In closing let me stress that I strongly disagree with those who urge you to "get out of Southeast Asia." Indeed I have consistently and vigorously supported our official position on Viet-Nam here in India. In this regard, I am enclosing copies of three of my columns which I wrote for our American Reporter illustrating what I have been saying here.

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

CONFIDENTIAL

-4-

Nevertheless, I am deeply persuaded (a) that if we try to outdo the North Vietnamese in regard to inputs of military ground forces we are likely to find ourselves in a major war with China and perhaps Russia as well and (b) that we are in urgent need of an effective political gesture such as a genuine land reform program that will underscore for millions of people at home and abroad the basic values that are at stake.

Believe me, I understand the tremendous burdens you carry. Like many others I wish I could do more to ease them. In any event, I know you would want me to share these personal and private views with you frankly.

With my warm regards,

Sincerely,



Chester Bowles

CONFIDENTIAL