

FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE

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Mr. Robert W. Komer
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Dear Bob:

The other day you expressed an interest in the period after the fall of Diem, when for some four or five months I was in charge of the USAID Rural Affairs operation. As you know, Diem fell at the end of November 1963, followed by Duong Van Minh who lasted through January 1964. As I recall, Rufus Phillips left Viet-Nam in January following the death of his father and in order to take over the family business which he still runs here in Washington. The USAID Mission Director, Joseph L. Brent, directed me to assume charge of Rural Affairs. I had previously been his Special Assistant. I did so at the beginning of February 1964 and remained in charge until my tour ended early in July.

Our principal problem was to maintain some sort of momentum as the Vietnamese Government was floundering under the impact not only of the overthrow of Diem, but the subsequent overthrow of Duong Van Minh by General Nguyen Khan. Naturally all the Ministers were changing, and many government officials had grave doubts about the legitimacy and longevity of the regime, particularly when it came to preparing budgets or authorizing expenditures of funds, whether these funds were of Vietnamese or American AID origin. As you know, Rural Affairs had had a special dollar and piastre budget. Funds were expended on the basis of plans agreed in advance between it and the GVN, the latter represented during the Diem period by the Interministerial Council for Strategic Hamlets and later by an office in JGS headed by the then Colonel Hoang Van Loc.

My principal function, which was by far the most significant contribution I ever had occasion to make in Viet-Nam, was to assure the continued function of the only elements of the GVN which remained operational in the field. The ministries were for all practical purposes paralyzed during the period of February to July. Working

with Colonel Loc we were able to come up with plans for each province and to get funds flowing to keep Province Chiefs and the GVN generally in business. We held frequent meetings in the provinces chaired by General Khanh accompanied by various ministers, Colonel Loc and myself. (I recall one particularly large meeting in My Tho at which all the Province Chiefs of IV Corps, all the USAID Prov Reps and U.S. Sector Advisors were present. Hatcher James was our man in Dinh Tuong at the time and would recall the meeting well.) Also, we staged a major meeting in Saigon, at which substantially all the Province Chiefs were present, in which Luu Van Tinh explained the flow of funds, answered the questions of Province Chiefs and dealt with specific urgent problems. I recall that we placed great emphasis on the dissemination of Miscellaneous Funds to the provinces and supported Province Chiefs in their very hesitant willingness to expend these funds, all in an effort to keep the GVN alive in the countryside.

For coordination on the U.S. side, we had an executive committee just below the Mission Council which handled pacification business on a day-to-day basis. Its members were Dick Stilwell for MACV, David Nes (DCM) from the Embassy, and myself from USAID. I also convened meetings of all USAID Prov Reps at intervals of approximately a month to six weeks to get direct reports from each province and invited senior officials from all agencies in order that they might get the best feel for the situation then available to us. Needless to say, the reports were pessimistic as to the security situation.

My deputies were first Bert Fraleigh and then Len Maynard. On the organizational side, I named the first regional representatives (one of whom was Hatcher James transferred from Dinh Tuong to II Corps), but their function was not to act as an intermediate command level but rather to inspect and expedite. In the case of III and IV Corps, their offices were in Saigon, but they spent most of their time in the field giving support to our Prov Reps and making sure that we in Saigon were responding immediately to field needs.

I was asked to stay on but preferred to leave in July, being followed by George Tanham. Along with George, James Killen came in as the new USAID Director and preferred not to continue the delegation to Rural Affairs of action responsibility for field operations as had been Brent's policy with regard to Phillips and myself. Killen established the regional offices as permanent command echelons reporting to him and also unilaterally cancelled the funds sign-off procedure which had been followed in the provinces up to that time. Under this procedure, all expenditures of U.S. pacification funds had to be countersigned by the USAID Prov Rep, the Province Chief and the U.S. Sector Advisor

(the latter as a courtesy). This procedure had given us a strong handle on the use of funds and had kept local corruption to a minimum. Killen believed that the Vietnamese should run their own affairs, and also doubted the qualifications of many of the Prov Reps to exercise meaningful judgments which would include signing off on funds. I held the view then, and still do, that while such Vietnamization was a splendid idea, the timing was premature. I do recall Vietnamese officials (including General Loc) as late as 1969 telling me that the provincial triumvirate was the most rational organizational framework ever used in Viet-Nam for purposes of control and coordination of activities and resources at province level. People like Holbrook, Hatcher James, Lehovich, Nighswonger, Len Maynard and others would recall this period in which I think it was no exaggeration to say that USAID Rural Affairs and its GVN counterpart kept the GVN alive in the provinces as a functioning organization.

The foregoing is pretty sketchy and general, but I have photographs of meetings, lists of Prov Reps and perhaps a few documents from that period if you are ever interested in seeing them.

Best regards.

Sincerely,

Ogden Williams
Coordinator
Viet-Nam Training Center