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WASHINGTON, D. C. 20016

November 12, 1981

Mr. Ogden Williams
4621 Q Street, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20007

Dear Ogden:

Many thanks for yours of November 3 and the attachment, Some Lessons Learned from the Vietnam War. I think the list is very good and helpful to keep in mind as I write about my experiences in Vietnam. I am especially impressed by numbers 1, 2, 4, 8 and 9.

I received your note just as I was leaving for St. Paul to take part in the installation of Steve Young as Dean of the School of Law of Hamline University. Steve served two tours in Vietnam while I was there. The first in Vinh Long province. The second in Saigon as assistant to Chuck Cooper, Minister for Economic Affairs.

All the best,



Lessons of Vietnam for Central America

I. Spirit and Will

We remember Napoleon's famous observation on the enormous preponderance of spiritual to material factors in war. More recently this was stated in the formula $P + T \times W$, that a nation's power is equivalent to population plus technology times will. If our allies - and our policy - are to succeed in Central America, the element vastly more important than any other in achieving such victory will be the spiritual factor. From this fact is derived Lesson One: Do nothing to weaken, discredit or destroy the pride, spirit and will to win of your allies.

There are both positive and negative ways of injuring such pride and spirit. On the positive side, throwing money and equipment at the problem, overreacting with material generosity, or Americanizing the issue by an excessive American presence all have a harmful effect.

Of course, if America, for its own purposes, wants to make the struggle its own and sincerely intends to achieve an American victory by force of American arms, that would be another matter. In such case America must be prepared to follow through to the end. It must truly make the war its own by faithfully observing its own legal and democratic processes for declaring and waging war, and must confront the enemy where he is, not in some allied country where he is not. (The example of Vietnam is obvious.)

~~But~~ at this time America has no desire whatsoever to make the Central American struggle its own, but it does want to deny the area to hostile powers. ~~Its~~ Its policy must therefore be to support friendly States who wish to fight for their own freedom and independence. It is they - not America - who must bear the primary burden of conflict. Our role is to be sure that our help really helps and does not hurt.

We have mentioned the dangers of killing one's allies with kindness, of providing the reality or the perception of a blank check, thus weakening the will, demeaning the pride and anesthetizing the instinct of self-preservation of the allies. But there is an equal danger on the negative side. Unfair or ill-informed criticism of our allies, particularly in public, is wrong and destructive. It is easy for those on the sidelines to be omniscient. It is also wrong and unfair to project U.S. domestic conflicts upon one's allies. We should recall that many people during the Vietnam conflict projected their hatreds of the U.S. establishment upon the South Vietnamese. They cried out for Ho Chi Minh to win, not because they had any interest in, or knowledge of, Vietnam at all, not any reason to hate the South Vietnamese or love Ho Chi Minh, but because they wanted to see the U.S. establishment defeated. And when they won in the end, they had no further interest whatsoever in the consequences for the people of Vietnam.

But, it will surely be asked, what should America's posture be when our allies are flawed - like all nations in varying degrees - by factors of social, political or economic injustice? We must recognize that no cause and no political entity is without its imperfections, but we must remember that no system on earth is more flawed in terms of human rights, political freedom and economic prosperity than the system

prevailing in the communist dictatorships. No ally of ours in Central America, however flawed, is more flawed than our and their enemies. It follows, therefore, that we should never despair of our cause or our allies because of their - and our - flaws, but rather work with them to correct wrongs while remaining fully confident in the ultimate superiority of our values. And the concrete proof of such superiority is everywhere at hand, in the long lines of refugees. It is no accident that the world's refugees invariably walk, climb or swim away from the communist dictatorships, not toward them, and no test of a nation or a system is more ultimate than that of whether people are trying to get into it or get out of it. So, retaining confidence in ourselves and our allies and while working to correct wrongs, our priority task should be to reinforce the confidence, pride, self-respect and will to win of our friends, not to demean and demoralize them by constant harping on their real or imagined shortcomings.

II Persistence

We are too enamored of quick solutions. Our span of attention is geared to the latest crisis, like the latest TV program. We expect to rush in, get a quick solution, lose interest and get out. In Vietnam we overreacted in the beginning and collapsed at the end. By contrast China and the Soviet Union were restrained at the beginning, insisting that the Vietnamese communist forces first demonstrate their will and capability before supplying substantial aid, but then supporting their clients steadily and without discouragement through the difficult years of maximum U.S. involvement, and then pouring in increased aid at the end as the U.S. resolve collapsed. Many small countries in the world have learned the danger of too close reliance on or alliance with the U.S., precisely because they perceive that our initial generosity is not matched by our long-term steadiness of purpose.