

Rufus Phillips
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May 28, 1985

Mr. George McT Kahin
Professor of International Studies
Cornell University
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Dear Professor Kahin:

I received your letter of 29 April 1985. Since I have my notes and original memorandums of these conversations, which I sent to Ambassador Lodge at that time, I will be happy to throw whatever light might be useful on what was going on.

First, I'd like to correct one error in your text, I was not the Director of USOM, who was Joseph Brent, but the Assistant Director for Rural Affairs. I was responsible for the USAID program in the provinces, but I also had been in Viet-Nam at an earlier period (1954-1956) and because of that had contact with a wide range of Vietnamese, many of whom were friends of long standing. Two such friends were Nguyen Dinh Thuan and Le Van Kim. I worked closely with them on trying to coordinate the military efforts against the VC with USOM's rural development and aid activities. Kim, I saw often as a personal friend.

When Lodge first came out as Ambassador, he tried, through his assistants, Freddie Flott and Mike Dunn, to establish independent sources of information within the American establishment about what was going on. One of the sources he turned to was me because of my intimate contacts with Vietnamese on all sides from Diem on down.

When Col Tung raided the Pagodas at Nhu's direction, both the Embassy and many Vietnamese were shocked. Lodge wanted to know what leading Vietnamese thought. As the Buddhist crisis deepened I became more and more drawn into the situation. I knew the Vietnamese. I understood Vietnamese politics. I took on the additional responsibility, albeit informally, of trying to keep Lodge informed at his request. Hence the reports on the meeting with Thuan and Kim which were put into cables by Lodge. I never saw the cables and I don't know how complete the copies are which you have.

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As far as I can gather from your text, you seem to be putting what Thuan and Kim had to say within the context of coup plotting against Diem. This is not correct. What they had to say was most directly related to the raid by Col Tung's Special Forces on the Pagodas and their concern for the future if Nhu continued to dominate Diem and control his actions. Their message was that the U.S. must make a maximum effort to separate Nhu from Diem and to get the Nhu's out of the country.

I saw Kim on 23 August, not 24 August. To try to clarify, he said that the key question was where did the U.S. stand on the Nhu's. If the U.S. took a clear stand against the Nhu's and in support of Army action to remove them from the Government, the Army (with the exception of Colonel Tung) would unite in support of such an action and would be able to carry it out. He felt that retaining the President, even though he personally did not like him, would be preferable providing all Ngo family influence could be permanently and effectively eradicated. It was not just a question of getting rid of the Nhu's, he said, but of also removing their followers from the scene.

As you can see the focus was on removing Nhu's influence, not Diem.

Then Thuan called me at home the evening of 23 August and asked me to meet him for breakfast at his house on 24 August which I did. What he had to say which bears most directly on what you have written is as follows:

Thuan conceded that it would be difficult to split the Nhu's off from the President but he felt strongly that the U.S. should attempt this. He said he could see no alternative to the President as a leader for Vietnam, no one else was as widely respected, or would be generally acceptable within Vietnam. Thuan felt that the U.S. had to exercise leadership and must be very firm, otherwise chaos was likely to result. Under no circumstances, he said, should the U.S. acquiesce in what the Nhu's had done. This would be disastrous.

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Thuan went on to say that Nhu was in a dangerously triumphant mood. Nhu believed himself in full control of the situation and was contemptuous of the Americans. Thuan said that Nhu had been very successful in tricking the Army (in answer to a direct question he said that the Generals did not know beforehand of the planned raid on Xa Loi, nor did he), and in dividing it into three commands. However, he felt that Nhu had very little real support in the Army and that the Army would turn firmly against Nhu if it knew that the U.S. would under no circumstances support a Government with the Nhu's in control.

You should know also by way of background that I made a number of strong personal pitches to Lodge at this time to talk to Diem about the Nhus, and also to ask for some temporary help from Washington in the form of having General Lansdale come out to try to persuade Diem to remove the Nhus.

I have reason to believe, based on hindsight, that Lodge never made any real effort to try to split Nhu from Diem and that he arrived on the scene with the opinion, which he managed to obscure from most of us, that the only solution to the political problems of Viet-Nam was to get rid of Diem. In retrospect he seemed to have his own agenda, as I cannot recall ever seeing anything indicating that he ever discussed the Nhu's directly with Diem and urged their removal. In regard to Lansdale, he would appear interested but never took any action. I would be very much interested to hear how you view the historical record in this regard.

You may recall that in a session of the Security Council on 10 September 1963 I was asked to talk to President Kennedy about the situation in Viet-Nam. The gist of what I had to say is covered in the sanitized memorandum of the same date by Bromley Smith (copy enclosed). The order of my saying it was, however, different and my key recommendation that the President send Gen. Lansdale to Viet-Nam to try to persuade Diem to get the Nhu's out of Viet-Nam in order to bring political unity and to avoid a coup was largely excised. (There is a hint of it in the sentence after the excised segment on page 2).

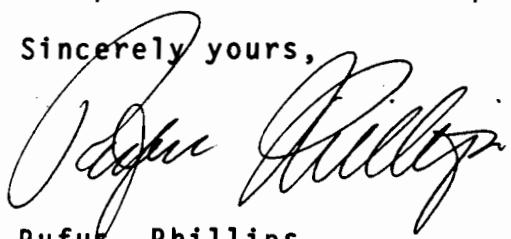
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In that connection, I also enclose an exchange of correspondence between myself and U.S. News and World Report correcting something they had to say. It is important to understand that while the Vietnamese and the Americans were being swept along in the summer of 1963 by political events towards the November coup, there was an attempt to try to prevent the tragedy which eventually occurred with the overthrow of Diem. I don't think Lodge ever understood the politics or the political climate of Viet-Nam, or the Vietnamese. He was very vain and apparently felt he could handle the situation all by himself.

You also inquired about General Khanh. I never knew him personally and have little idea what he was thinking or doing at the time.

I hope this has been helpful.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rufus Phillips".

Rufus Phillips

cc: Ashbel Green

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17 June 1985

Mr Rufus Phillips
6520 Ridge Street
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Dear Mr Phillips,

Thank you for your good letter of May 28 with its several enclosures. You have been very helpful, and I am most grateful.

I have benefitted both from the account of your conversations with Kim and Thuan and of the September 10 meeting of the NSC. Your record of the latter is subject to less sanitization than what I'd seen before, and I value your explanation of the excised sentences. Accordingly I have re-written the parts of my manuscript dealing with these matters and am today sending off my revision to Ashbel Green. I enclose those revised pages that reflect your information and hope I have done justice to it. If not, please point out any errors of fact or interpretation. I've assumed you would not object to my citing you as a source, but if you have reservations about that I will of course not do so.

I must say that you were very much justified in your criticism of the reference made to your views by U.S. News and World Report. I hope that they had the good grace to publish your letter.

Again, many thanks for your help.

Sincerely


George McT Kahin

Encl:

GK/sth

Rufus Phillips
6520 Ridge Street
McLean, Virginia 22101

Letter exchange
w/ Prof. George
McT Kahin

July 2, 1985

Mr. George McT Kahin
Professor of International Studies
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Republic of Singapore

Dear Professor Kahin:

Thank you for your kind letter of June 17. I am happy that what I sent you was helpful.

I have no objections to your quoting my letter in footnote 28 concerning my meeting with Kim and Thuan because what I gave you in my letter were direct quotes from my original memorandums which I had sent to Lodge.

I would very much prefer not to be quoted at the top of page 25 (footnote 32) in regard to my opinions about Lodge. My intention in the letter was to give you my private opinion in order to suggest an area worthy of your further investigation.

My last comment concerns your statement on page 35 that I strongly supported Mendenhall's bleak assessment. I don't want to overcomplicate the situation but the fact is that I made it clear at the NSC Meeting that I didn't agree with Mendenhall's assessment either. My recollection is that Mendenhall's assessment was focused almost exclusively on the Buddhist situation in Central Viet-Nam, and that I disagreed with his prognosis of a religious war or of a large scale movement to the Viet-Cong. What I feared was chaos with Nhu exercising greater control, and even pulling his own coup, with the Viet-Cong then exploiting that by filling the resulting vacuum in the countryside. This may be a fine distinction but it is correct.

It would be more accurate to say, if you feel it necessary, that what I said appeared to substantiate, or had the effect of supporting, Mendenhall's bleak assessment.

Thank you for sending me those parts of your manuscript.

Sincerely yours,

Rufus C. Phillips III

RCP:spb

cc: Ashbel Green