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Dulles to Collins  
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Internal and Private

Dear Joe:

I am very sorry indeed not to be here when you arrive. I shall, of course, see you quickly when I get back on Monday. In the meantime, here is a sample of my thinking.

Diem was picked not by us but by the French. We have backed him and backed him 100% because (a) nobody better appeared on the horizon, and (b) because no one can survive without wholehearted backing.

The French, however, have long since become dubious about Diem, and, while I have no doubt that Ely personally has been loyal, the French Government and press have made no secret of their desire to find a replacement. The French press has uniformly put the United States label on Diem. To them he is always "American-backed Diem" or "the Diem experiment". Never have they suggested that he is "French-backed" or looked upon as other than an "experiment".

It seems to me that the crisis came when Diem was threatened by a minor act of insurgency by the Binh Xuyen. It happened that that occurred when I was lunching at the White House with a bipartisan group, Congressmen one day and Senators the next. I told them that this was just the opportunity we had been waiting for to find out whether Diem had the courage and determination to act and whether he had the loyalty of the Army. I said that if the two things were demonstrated, then I thought we were over the hump, but that if he failed in either respect, then he would have to go. But at least we would have the answer. Therefore, it came as a tremendous shock and disappointment when we learned that,

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although Diem did have the determination to act and although he apparently did have the loyalty of the Army, the French prevented his acting and allowed the Binh Xuyen to defy him with impunity and to compel him to make a "truce" which put the National Government on a parity with a bunch of gangsters.

I am not surprised if many in Vietnam interpreted that as the writing on the wall and hurriedly disassociated themselves from what seemed to be a doomed government. I say this without ignoring the fact that Diem's own characteristics, long known to us, may have contributed appreciably to this result.

My attitude now is the same as it has always been and frequently expressed to the French, namely, if every change can be made to advantage, we are open-minded to it. However, it would seem to me disastrous to destroy the morale and authority of the Diem Government even before we have any idea as to what would come next.

Among other things that need to be explored in this connection is the question of what change can obtain financial backing from the United States comparable to that which we are prepared to give Diem. This is a matter not just for the Executive but for the Congress and those who have leadership in this matter, such as Mansfield in the Senate and Walter Judd in the House, are very strongly opposed to any shift. As things now stand, they would, I think, throw their influence, perhaps decisively, against backing any substitute that now seems in sight.

Also, I wonder whether it can be taken for granted, as it seems to be, that Diem will get out quietly and not himself raise a flag of rebellion against a successor régime as "colonialist". If he has the idealistic and stubborn qualities which have been attributed to him, I would think that there was risk about this.

Such considerations seem to me very important. I recognize that Diem probably cannot carry on without a broader base, although if he had United States and French support, the loyalty of the Army, a considerable popular support, and Cao Dai and Hoa Hao benevolent neutrality, that is a not negligible base. But if change is to be effected, can it not come as a gradual evolutionary process and not as an abrupt

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break? I fear the latter would have consequences which would be disastrous.

It is because of these reasons that I am glad that you are here.

Mr. Hoover is fully aware of our thinking and while Walter Robertson is unfortunately also away, others here have been sitting in on all the talks. Also, of course, CIA has a big and helpful interest in the situation, as do the Defense people.

I think it important that you should talk with the Congressional Committees or Subcommittees. But perhaps this could usefully be deferred until there is a clearer line of policy agreed on by the Executive Branch.

It seems to me that, so far, the French come up only with generalities which sound good, but that when it comes actually to filling in the blanks with names and with money, then the trouble begins.

With my very best wishes, and looking forward to seeing you on Monday, I am

Sincerely yours,

John Foster Dulles

P.S. This was dictated before I had a chance to read your latest cables reporting your talks with Do, Quat, Minh, and so forth. These provide considerable food for thought.

J. F. D.

S:JFD:cjp