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MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
DEPUTY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

From: BrigGen Lansdale, OSO/OSD

Subj: Vietnam

As desired by you, I visited Vietnam 2-14 January 1961. After twelve days of intensive looking and listening over some old familiar ground, I have come to the following personal convictions:

a. 1961 promises to be a fateful year for Vietnam.

b. The Communist Viet Cong hope to win back Vietnam south of the 17th Parallel this year, if at all possible, and are much further along towards accomplishing this objective than I had realized from reading the reports received in Washington.

c. The free Vietnamese, and their government, probably will be able to do no more than postpone eventual defeat -- unless they find a Vietnamese way of mobilizing their total resources and then utilizing them with spirit.

d. The U. S. team in Vietnam will be unable to help the Vietnamese with real effectiveness, unless the U.S. system of their operation is changed sufficiently to free these Americans to do the job that needs doing, and unless they do it with sensitive understanding and wisdom.

e. If Free Vietnam is won by the Communists, the remainder of Southeast Asia will be easy pickings for our enemy, because the toughest local force on our side will be gone. A Communist victory also would be a major blow to U. S. prestige and influence, not only in Asia but throughout the world, since the world believes that Vietnam has remained free only through U.S. help. Such a victory would tell leaders of other governments that it doesn't pay to be a friend of the U.S., and would be an even more marked lesson than Laos.

f. Vietnam can be kept free, but it will require a changed U.S. attitude, plenty of hard work and patience, and a new spirit by the Vietnamese. The Viet Cong have been pushing too hard militarily to get their roots down firmly and can be defeated by an inspired and determined effort.

g. Ngo Dinh Diem is still the only Vietnamese with executive ability and the required determination to be an effective President. I believe there will be another attempt to get rid of him soon, unless the U. S. makes it clear that we are backing him as the elected top man. If the 11 November coup had been successful, I believe that a number of highly selfish and mediocre people would be squabbling among themselves for power while the Communists took over. The Communists will be more alert to exploit the next coup attempt. At present, most Vietnamese oppositionists believe that the U. S. would look favorably upon a successful coup.

h. Vietnam has progressed faster in material things than it has spiritually. The people have more possessions but are starting to lose the will to protect their liberty. There is a big lesson here to be learned about the U.S. aid program which needs some most serious study.

Recommendations

Before I left Saigon, I discussed my impressions with Ambassador Durbrow who was most gracious towards me during the visit. Included in these impressions was my feeling that many of the Americans in Saigon perhaps subconsciously believed in defeat, probably had spent too much time and energy on the political situation in Saigon instead of on the very real Viet Cong menace, and were in need of some bolstering up by the Chief of Mission. In this feeling of defeat, I would have to except the Chief of MAAG and the local CIA Chief who believe we can win. Ambassador Durbrow told me of the memo he had issued to all Americans in Saigon after the 11 November coup attempt. I said this was a good move, but much more than writing a paper was needed.

He asked me what suggestions I had. I said that I didn't have much immediately and would have to do a lot of thinking about it. The situation in Vietnam is not black and white, but a most complex one in all shades of gray. Many Americans and Vietnamese expected me to come up with some sort of a miracle, to turn Ngo Dinh Diem into an Americanized modern version of the ancient Vietnamese leader Le Loi. However, the task requires more than a gimmick or some simple answer. It will take a lot of hard work and follow-through. In 12 days, all I could do was learn as much as I could and to "plant a seed or two" with Ngo Dinh Diem and other Vietnamese leaders who know that I speak out of deep affection for the free Vietnamese.

Since leaving Vietnam, I have spent many hours thinking about the situation there. I am far from having a complete proposal to solve the situation. However, I do have some recommendations now for steps which should be taken to start remedying the downhill and dangerous trend in Vietnam. They are:

a. The U. S. should recognize that Vietnam is in a critical condition and should treat it as a combat area of the cold war, as an area requiring emergency treatment.

b. When there is an emergency, the wise thing to do is to pick the best people you have, people who are experienced in dealing with this precise type of emergency, and send them to the spot with orders to remedy the situation. When you get the people in position and free them to work, you should then back them up in every practical way you can. The real decisions will be made in little daily actions in Vietnam, not in Washington. That's why the best are needed on the spot.

c. Our U.S. team in Vietnam should have a hard core of experienced Americans who know and really like Asia and the Asians, dedicated people who are willing to risk their lives for the ideals of freedom, and who will try to influence and guide the Vietnamese towards U.S. policy objectives with the warm friendships and affection which our close alliance deserves. We should break the rules of personnel assignment, if necessary, to get such U.S. military and civilians to Vietnam.

d. Under emergency conditions, our aid to Vietnam should be treated as contingency business and be given expedited priority handling until we can afford to take a breathing spell.

e. Ambassador Durrow should be transferred in the immediate future. He has been in the "forest of tigers" which is Vietnam for nearly four years now and I doubt that he himself realizes how tired he has become or how close he is to individual trees in this big woods. Correctly or not, the recognized government of Vietnam does not look upon him as a friend, believing that he sympathized strongly with the coup leaders of 11 November.

f. The new Ambassador should arrive as many weeks as possible before the April elections, for which the Communists are now actively preparing with their "political struggle" tactics almost unhindered. The new Ambassador should be a person with marked leadership talents who can make the Country Team function harmoniously and spiritually, who

can influence Asians through understanding them sympathetically, and who is alert to the power of the Mao Tse Tung tactics now being employed to capture Vietnam and who is dedicated to feasible and practical democratic means to defeat these Communist tactics.

g. Serious consideration should be given to replacing USOM Chief Gardiner. A number of Vietnamese pointedly answered my questions about Gardiner by talking about his deputy, Coster, while admitting that "Gardiner seems to be a nice man who has fallen asleep in our climate."

h. U.S. military men in Vietnam should be freed to work in the combat areas. Our MAAG has a far greater potential than is now being utilized. U.S. military men are hardly in a position to be listened to when they are snug in rear areas and give advice to Vietnamese officers who have attended the same U.S. military schools and who are now in a combat in which few Americans are experienced. MAAG personnel from General McGarr on down expressed desire to get more into real field work; let's give them what they want as far as U.S. permission is concerned and let them earn their way into positions of greater influence with the Vietnamese military in the field.

i. A mature American, with much the same qualifications as those given above for the selection of the next Ambassador, should be assigned to Vietnam for political operations which will start creating a Vietnamese-style foundation for more democratic government without weakening the strong leadership required to bring about the defeat of the Communists. This must not be a "clever" type who is out to gain a reputation as a "manipulator" or a word-smith who is more concerned about the way his reports will look in Washington than in implementing U.S. policy in Vietnam.

j. We must support Ngo Dinh Diem until another strong executive can replace him legally. President Diem feels that Americans have attacked him almost as viciously as the Communists, and he has withdrawn into a shell for self-protection. We have to show him by deeds, not words alone, that we are his friend. This will make our influence effective again.

K. We must do much, much more constructive work with the oppositionists. I suspect that the U.S. has taught them to be carping critics and disloyal citizens by our encouragement of these traits. They need to put together a constructive program which can save.

Vietnam from the Communists by building something worth a man's life to preserve. If it's a good program, we should encourage one strong political opposition to emerge, without endangering the national security. Here is where our political skill needs to be used. This political work is needed as a matter of grave urgency. Unless a constructive outlet is found quickly, the opposition in Saigon is going to explode in violence again and the Viet Cong are wide awake to exploit it this time.

The Communist Threat

It was a shock to me to look over maps of the estimated situation with U.S. and Vietnamese intelligence personnel, as well as with President Diem who held similar grim views. The Communist Viet Cong now dominate much of the 1st and 5th Military Regions, as well as being active in spots in other regions, according to these estimates. The probable strength of the Communist armed forces in South Vietnam was given to me in various guesses from 3,000 to 15,000. My guess is that the strength is now closer to the latter figure and that only Hanoi knows accurately.

This strength estimate by itself isn't what shocked me. The shocking part was to realize that the thousands of disciplined and trained Communist graduates of "proletarian military science" had been able to infiltrate the most productive area of South Vietnam and to gain control of nearly all of it except for narrow corridors protected by military actions and for a few highly-localized spots where loyal paramilitary forces (Civil Guards and Self-Defense Corps) have undertaken inspired counter-guerrilla actions or where villagers work closely with the military.

The Viet Cong have the initiative and most of the control over the region from the jungled foothills of the High Plateau north of Saigon all the way south down to the Gulf of Siam, excluding the big city area of Saigon-Cholon. This is Vietnam's "bread-basket" where most of its rice and rubber are grown.

Unlike the Philippines or Malaya, the Communists cannot be cordoned off at the country's borders and then dealt with as an internal security problem alone. The borders of Vietnam are long and include some of the most difficult terrain in the world to patrol. It is apparent that many of the Viet Cong infiltrate from Cambodia, particularly from Svay Rieng Province. Also, southeastern Laos has a reported Communist

build-up, with RLG forces committed elsewhere, and increasing infiltration into Vietnam is reported.

There is an intense psychological attack being waged against free Vietnam by the Communists. This not only includes an almost constant barrage from powerful Radio Hanoi, which is reportedly relayed from Cambodia and is received as a loud and clear signal in South Vietnam, but also a heavy campaign by on-the-spot agitprop agents. A part of the psychological attack is directed against Americans, particularly against U.S. MAAG personnel, along the lines of the Chinese Communist "hate America" campaign. I did not have the time or means to assess the effect of this psychological attack which has been going on for years.

The big city area of Saigon-Cholon undoubtedly is a target of Communist operations, although I was able to find out little about either the Communist organization or its operations in this city area. U.S. intelligence personnel believed that Vietnamese counter-intelligence organizations were so actively "hustling" so many suspects that the Communists have been unable to institute much of an organization. President Diem believed that the Communists were concentrating their work elsewhere, following the dictum: "first the mountains, then the countryside, and then the city." The attitude of Vietnamese and U.S. officials reminded me of the French and Vietnamese officials in Hanoi in 1953-54, who were so surprised later to discover that a complete, block-by-block clandestine Communist apparatus existed there. Or, of Filipinos and Americans who believed the Huks were in central Luzon in 1950 and were so surprised when an entire Communist politburo was captured in the city of Manila. I believe that the people in Saigon-Cholon have been the target of considerable subversive effort by the Communists and that it takes an in-place organization to carry this out.

Communist strength figures are difficult to determine due in part to the different categories of personnel. I was able to get no estimate on the number of Communist political-psychological operators, although the DRV reportedly have trained many for work in the south. Also, the Communist military personnel include regulars who have infiltrated from the north, plus territorial forces and guerrillas who apparently are recruited locally. Colonel Tran Thien Khiem, who commands the 5th Military Region, broke his estimate of some 7,000 Viet Cong military in his region into 3,320 regulars, 1,170 territorials, and 2,590 guerrillas. When the Vietminh troops were transferred to the north in 1954-55 under the Geneva Agreement, many left families.

behind in the south, along with stay-behind organizations and arms caches. Although the pacification campaigns of 1955-56 cleaned up what the Communists had left behind to some extent, there were remnants remaining which the Viet Cong have since exploited and augmented greatly over the past 5 years.

President Ngo Dinh Diem

President Diem and I are friends. Also, he is a man who put other Vietnamese friends of mine in jail or exiled them. It is hardly a blind friendship.

Prior to my departure from Washington, Jeff Parsons asked if I would please size-up President Diem carefully to see if he had changed much from when I had worked with him so closely in 1954-56. In our first meeting, he was a bit cautious with me. I suspected that he was waiting for me to drop Washington's other shoe as a follow-up to the Ambassador's demands that he reform his ways. So, I reminisced on what we had been through together in the past and he joined in, adding the story of the 11 November coup as he saw it. Our meetings from then on became more like the old days, with plenty of give and take, but only after I convinced him that I still had affection for the Vietnamese people and was trying to understand their problems before sounding off.

He seems to have a better grasp of economic matters than formerly. Also, I believe he sincerely wants to pass some of his daily burden of work to others. He said that he had found this extremely hard to do, since too many others were soft in carrying out responsibilities or else were too vain to knuckle-down to hard work. This has forced him to over-burden Nguyen Dinh Thuan, Secretary of State for the Presidency, who doesn't hesitate to make tough decisions when needed, who has had to act as hatchet-man when others were too soft to get rid of incompetents, and who has been loyal to his boss (although he speaks right up for his own views). Vice President Tho is so soft-hearted that he really never takes corrective action against wrong doers. Vu Van Thai is a "blackmailer" by threatening to resign after convincing the Americans that he is the most brilliant Vietnamese in economic matters, although he is a poor executive whose work is in bad shape; if Diem accepted Thai's resignation, the Americans would feel that the Vietnamese Government was going to hell. (Unfortunately, there's some truth in these feelings of Diem's about Tho and Thai).

I believe President Diem is more screened in by his "palace guard" than he realizes -- but then much the same could be said of other leaders elsewhere. I noted that he still has a personal informant net and I managed to talk to some of them privately. The largest influence, but not the only one, is wielded by his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. However, I found President Diem unusually well informed on the situation in Vietnam, including the bad aspects -- better informed than any other Vietnamese among the many with whom I talked.

In reflecting on our conversations, I have concluded that most folks who talk to him have little empathy for, or sensitive understanding of, him. They fail to realize that Diem is human and doesn't like the idea of people trying to kill him out of hatred; the coup attempt of 11 November opened at 3 a.m. by bursts of heavy machine gun fire into his bedroom in an obvious try at liquidating him in his bed. On top of this, he has now had nearly 7 years of venomous attack by the Communists who know that he is a major obstacle which must be destroyed before they can win. This is a daily psychological attack on him in his own country, in his own language, and listened to by his own people. The only way he could shut this off today would be to give up what he, and we, believe in. On top of this, he has criticism heaped on him by many who are simply being destructive, he has administrators who are disloyal or whose vanity is expressed in talking a better job of work than in doing it. And then, to cap the criticisms, he feels that many Americans have contempt for him -- that the U.S. which could be Vietnam's staunchest friend is somehow taking the same psychological line with him as do the Communists, that somehow our nobly-expressed policies get carried out with much pettiness in actual practice.

If the next American official to talk to President Diem would have the good sense to see him as a human being who has been through a lot of hell for years -- and not as an opponent to be beaten to his knees -- we would start regaining our influence with him in a healthy way. Whatever else we might think of him, he has been unselfish in devoting his life to his country and has little in personal belongings to show for it. If we don't like the heavy influence of Brother Nhu, then let's move someone of ours in close. This someone, however, must be able to look at problems with understanding, suggest better solutions than does Nhu, earn a position of influence.

The next time we become "holier than thou", we might find it sobering to reflect on the DRV. Do the Soviets and the Chinese Communists give Ho Chi Minh a similar hard time, or do they aid and abet him?

U. S. Political Efforts

The United States has been the main foreign political mentor for Free Vietnam since it became an independent nation. Of course other nations have had their influence. But we were the ones who have spoken with authority, who have held the purse-strings, who trained and advised the government personnel, and to whom most Vietnamese in political life have looked for guidance. It is only human to want to find someone else to blame for what has gone wrong. But, we won't be able to start doing effective political work until we admit that our own actions carry responsibilities with them. There are plenty of Aaron Burr's, a few Alexander Hamilton's and practically no George Washington's, Tom Jefferson's or Tom Paine's in Saigon today . . . largely as a result of our U.S. political influence. This certainly is not the U.S. policy we had hoped to implement.

Ambassador Durbrow seemed genuinely surprised when I told him that the Can Lao Party in Vietnam was originally promoted by the U.S. State Department and was largely the brain-child of a highly-respected, senior U.S. Foreign Service professional. Several weeks after this action was undertaken originally, I learned of it and warned that the benefits were extremely short-term and that great lasting harm could result by a favored party forcing older parties to go underground. However, the decision had been made, the Can Lao party had been started, and we had to start working from that reality. We cannot go back to living in the past and must keep moving ahead, but that doesn't mean that we have to pay forever for our mistakes.

However, the real point is that we don't seem to have very long memories or enough solid feeling of responsibility for our acts. Many U.S. Foreign Service officials leap into attacks on the Can Lao Party. I agree with their reasons. Any thinking American would. But I sure would feel better about it if they could only remember the consequences of their own actions for a few short years - and learn from that memory. I cannot truly sympathize with Americans who help promote a fascistic state and then get angry when it doesn't act like a democracy.

So, what should we do about it? I have a concrete recommendation. We need an American in Saigon who can work with real skill, with great sensitivity to Vietnamese feelings, and with a fine sense of the dangerous limits of Vietnamese national security in a time of emergency. This unusual American should be given the task of creating

an opposition party which would coalesce the majority of the opposition into one organization, of helping this new party adopt a platform which contains sound ideas for building national entities which the Vietnamese people would find worth defending against the Communists, and of strongly influencing it to play the role of loyal opposition while President Diem is in power and the nation is in such great danger.

This work with the opposition is a matter of grave urgency. Unless the energies of the malcontents, the frustrated, the patriots on the outs are quickly channeled into constructive political works, they are going to explode into destructive political work. This opposition situation in Saigon-Cholon is at the bursting point, and there is no safety valve. When it next blows, and if Diem cannot cope with it, the Siagon political scene has all the makings of turning into anarchy. It can happen, and soon.

I saw a number of opposition people, officials of various parties, members of the National Assembly, and disgruntled members of President Diem's administration. They eagerly told me how they were criticizing Diem's actions more and more openly. I asked them what their own program was, other than to seize power for themselves or to have me pat them on the head for being critics. Few of them had any sensible ideas. I told them they'd better get busy scratching for a better program themselves or else I could only assume that they were being disloyal or treasonous in a time of great national danger. I trust that other Americans talking to these oppositionists will do the same or we will be inviting disaster by listening to this and keeping mum when we should be working like beavers to turn it into constructive channels.

If we can get most of the oppositionists meeting with each other to try to put together a platform they can all agree on, and can protect such work so that it can be done fairly openly, we will have an extremely useful political action in motion. It will absorb months of political energies which otherwise will go towards the solution of armed overthrow. A major opposition party, once it starts becoming a reality, will tend to make the several governmental groupings such as the Can Lao, MNR, and Nhu's labor organizations start coalescing into one stronger group. In this way, we can help promote a two-party system which can afford to be surfaced, end much of the present clandestine political structures, and give sound encouragement to the development of new political leaders. There are many fine younger patriots who need this sort of a healthy political atmosphere to develop in, if we ever expect Vietnam to have a real future.

Comments

Here are some additional thoughts:

a. President Diem said that if it hadn't been for the dedicated anti-communism of about a million Catholics, Vietnam could never have kept going this long. Yet his brother, Archbishop Thuc, told me that the refugees from the north (including many Catholics) had been settled into such remunerative new lives in the south that they had gone soft, no longer wanted to fight, and criticized the government for wanting to continue the war. Also, the Saigon-Cholon area is seething with political discontent while the people are far better off in material possessions than ever before. The shops are full of goods for Tet and the people are buying heavily. Somehow, the U. S. has filled their bellies but has neglected their spirit.

b. Many of the Vietnamese in the countryside who were right up against the Viet Cong terror were full of patriotic spirit. Those who seemed to be in the hardest circumstances, fighting barefoot and with makeshift weapons, had the highest morale. They still can lick the Viet Cong with a little help. There's a lesson here on our giving aid. Maybe we should learn that our funds cannot buy friends or a patriotic spirit by mere materialistic giving. Perhaps we should help those who help themselves, and not have a lot of strings on that help.

c. The Viet Cong crowded a lot of action into the year 1960. They infiltrated thousands of armed forces into South Vietnam, recruited local levies of military territorials and guerrillas, and undertook large scale guerrilla and terroristic operations. In so doing, they neglected doing sound political work at the grass roots level and broke one of Mao Tse Tung's cardinal rules. Many people in the south now under their thumb are unhappy about it, but too terrified to act against these new rulers. The Viet Cong apparently have been working hard recently to rectify this error, and now have political cadres in the field. We still have a chance of beating them if we can give the people some fighting chance of gaining security and some political basis of action. Since both of these actions will have to be carried out by Vietnamese forces in their Defense establishment, it is worthwhile to make U.S. help to the Vietnamese in the contested provinces along these sorely needed lines a priority mission of the U.S. military in Vietnam. The political actions should be the implementing of Vietnamese governmental policy by Vietnamese

force commanders, aided by Vietnamese psychological warfare units. If the U.S. military doesn't ride herd on this, it is apt to be neglected and is too vital to keeping Vietnam free to be made a secondary work.

d. I am passing a copy of this to Admiral Felt at CINCPAC. Suggest that copies be passed also to selected persons in Defense, State, and CIA.

EG Lansdale

Edward G. LANSDALE
Brigadier General, U.S.A.F..