

July 25, 1963

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Subject: Conversation with President Diem on 19 July 1963

From: Rufus C. Phillips, Assistant Director for Rural Affairs

1. President Diem opened the conversation by asking if I had visited any provinces recently. I replied that I had, particularly in the Center and that the Strategic Hamlet program was continuing to make progress. I said we were particularly happy that in Quang Tri and Thua Thien, pigs had been distributed out to even the most isolated hamlets. The President said that he was very pleased with this program. I said yes that the people also appeared to be pleased but one thing worried me in this area; many of the farmers, even in the distant hamlets, were wearing a small piece of yellow cloth pinned to their clothes.

2. The President did not comment on this but asked about a progress report on the Strategic Hamlet program which I had promised him back in May. I gave him a five-page summary of the report in French without the attachments on each Corps Area which contain the detailed province-by-province assessments. The President then remarked that so much depended upon the province chief in carrying out the Strategic Hamlet program.

3. For example, he said, Colonel Dien (the Phuoc-Binh-Thanh Special Zone Commander) was making progress in Phuoc Thanh despite strong VC resistance while other province chiefs with easier situations accomplished nothing. However, he was worried about Colonel Dien's health. He drove himself too hard, running on nervous energy alone; and his lungs were bad. I suggested that some of the load might be taken off Dien if he could be given a larger and more able staff. The President said Dien had requested such assistance and that he had agreed to help him.

4. I told the President that we had recently made a successful shipment of supplies to Father Hoa to open up a sea entrance to Hai Yen and I thought that things were progressing well in Father Hoa's area. The President said he was pleased to hear that. I then asked the President when he intended to create the new province west of Saigon. He said a new province could not be created overnight; it was particularly difficult to find the right person for Province Chief. He had asked both the Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior to propose candidates and they had been able to produce only two, neither of whom were well qualified. The President then launched into a discussion of the difficulties of running an underdeveloped country where adequate personnel were not available. He said that the "petite cadres" existed in adequate quantity but not real leaders or administrators. The civilians tend to be afraid or were too regulation-bound while the military tended to be too direct and inflexible. He said that

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the NIA was now graduating good personnel although they were young but that the first three classes had not had any students with the first degree Bacho (Baccalaureate). According to the President, being a district or province chief called for some educational background. This was also the difficulty with the military. In addition, the military tended to direct rather than to persuade and they did not know how to talk to the population. He said he had recently replaced three province chiefs for various shortcomings. Colonel Ut in An Xuyen was basically a good man but had been overcome by the difficulties of his job. The previous province chief in Long An did not know how to communicate with the population, and Major Tho, the former province chief of Dinh Tuong, was not a good administrator having had too many other jobs to do.

5. The President said few understood that the Strategic Hamlet Program was a program of basic democracy and that this was the only way to proceed in an underdeveloped country. Other approaches had failed in Burma, Thailand and elsewhere, yet what the Government was trying to do in the Strategic Hamlet program was completely overlooked by the opposition. The opposition, including the Caravelle group, was a mob without a plan. They spoke of democracy but never practiced it themselves. Their platform was only "put me in power in place of Diem." Vietnam did not need such opposition but it did need democracy at the base, i. e., the Strategic Hamlet program.

6. The President said that there were a lot of generals in the Army who also did not understand the Strategic Hamlet program or what the war was all about. He had replaced some of these generals and allowed younger men to come into positions of command who understood, yet he was being criticized by American correspondents for having replaced or pushed aside the best leaders in the Army. Take General Don for instance, he said. The replacement of Don as I Corps Commander had been strongly recommended by General Harkins because Don was not aggressive. Now the correspondents were saying he was the best officer in the Army. The President then launched into a bitter denunciation of the press. He said he could not understand why Vietnam had to be humiliated by the American Press, particularly when it was one of the few true friends the US had in Asia. He said the correspondents didn't treat Burma, Indonesia, Cambodia, -- countries which were basically hostile to the US, this way. He said he was sure that the reaction to this kind of humiliation and criticism among the population was very bad and might result in some kind of explosion such as occurred on Taiwan. The President said that Newsweek had even accused Bishop Thuc of possessing his own army. Bishop Thuc sent a cable to Newsweek, paid out of his own

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pocket, which cost him 12,000 piastres, denouncing the accusation and threatening to sue Newsweek. The President asked parenthetically why he was now being referred to only as "Roman Catholic President Diem" no longer just "President Diem." This was grossly unfair. He said he felt that such criticism had gone beyond what one could reasonably expect the Government to bear.

7. The President then launched into a long history of Buddhism in Vietnam and the Buddhist affair from the beginning. To begin with, the President said, the press has falsely presented Vietnam as a Buddhist country. Vietnam was not a Buddhist nor a Catholic country, but a Confucianist country. This was why, when he became President, he reinstated the ancient Vietnam Government practice of observing Confucius' birthday as a holiday. The Buddhists occupy the same place traditionally in Vietnam as in China. The Buddhists represented by the General Association of Buddhists was what was called "Buddhism Renove." They were originally sponsored by the French in the pre-World War II years to divide the nationalists in Vietnam. During the war against the French, renovated Buddhism was penetrated by the Vietcong and flourished mostly in Central Vietnam areas controlled by the Vietcong, prior to 1954. These areas were mainly Binh Dinh, Quang Ngai and Phu Yen Provinces and partially Thua Thien and Quang Tri. This was why there was no real support for renovated Buddhism and the General Buddhist Association in the South, except in Saigon. Elsewhere in the South, Buddhism was of a traditional nature with individual temples in the villages which were visited by mainly the women once or twice a year. Often these temples were tombs and other historical shrines and had perhaps one or two old monks who attended them. There was only one Buddhist sect in the South which had possessed any real organization and that was the Co Son Mon Sect which was now being slandered by the General Buddhist Association. It was true that in recent years the Co Son Mon had dwindled in strength but it was the traditional Buddhist organization in the South. Therefore, Buddhism had very little support in the South and in the Center. Much of its support was partially Communist-sponsored.

8. The President said that there was now considerable strife going on within the Buddhist movement between the Co Son Mon and the General Association which had been taken over by younger monks such as Chau and Minh who were truly upstarts and had a history of being "adventurers" in the North before and after Geneva, and who had been with the Vietminh before that. The President said that unfortunately Quang was too weak and Khiem too old to provide any real leadership. They were being used by these younger monks.

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9. Buddhist actions against his Government were the ultimate in ingratitude, the President said. Before the present Government came to power, Buddhism had never been encouraged to organize nor had it received any support. However, under his Government more temples had been built than in the previous twenty or thirty years. His Government had been the first to contribute to the construction of Buddhist temples; without the Government's help Xa Loi would never had been built.

10. The President then launched into a blow-by-blow account of the Buddhist affair from the beginning of the incident in Hue on May 8. To summarize his opinions: The Government had been right and the Buddhists wrong throughout the affair. For instance, there was no doubt in his mind that the Vietcong had set off plastic charges during the incident in Hue; the nature of the wounds inflicted proved this. I tried to point out that no matter what the truth was, it appeared that over 95% of the population in the Thua Thien and Quang Tri area believed that the Government had been at fault and was responsible for killing people during the demonstration. The President replied that this may have been true right after the incident but was no longer true. He was sure because he had talked to people during his recent visit to Hue. Also the coroner's report proved that the Government had not been responsible.

11. The President then spoke in great detail about various subterfuges being used by the monks, including employing hooligans from the markets dressed in monk's clothing and other devices, to cause trouble. He said that all the information he had received indicate that the Government had acted with the greatest of restraint and that the Buddhists were systematically trying to subvert the Government. He said that he strongly objected to a conciliatory attitude towards these people because they were obviously trying to subvert the government. He spoke bitterly about the fact that the Government's weak position had been forced on it; the truth had been distorted by the press bringing international pressure to bear on Vietnam, thus weakening the Government. He compared the current situation to that which existed during the 1960 coup, citing how, what he termed Ambassador Durbrowe's representations for clemency toward the rebels, had actually lowered the prestige of the Government and had almost resulted in its overthrow.

12. I asked the President whether he felt that he always got the truth from his own people. The President said that he did not believe everything he was told and had his own private sources of information.

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He said that the claim of the Buddhists that the Government was carrying out mass arrests against them was only provocation on their part. I said that this might be so, but there were specific incidents of Buddhists being arrested with no apparent due cause, some of which were creating a very bad impression. I said that, for instance, the other day a Buddhist monk entered the American Embassy and upon leaving was trailed by several policemen who tried to arrest him. He fled back into the Embassy for sanctuary. This had, I said, created a very bad impression.

13. The President said that orders had been given to prevent monks from demonstrating because the Government had received definite information from VC penetrations that the VC intended to exploit all demonstrations, whether Buddhist or not, by throwing grenades and setting off explosives. In the case of the monk who entered the Embassy, the police had been afraid that he might try to burn himself in front of the Embassy or create other disturbances which would draw a crowd and thus provide the VC with an opportunity. I asked the President if anyone had informed Ambassador Nolting that this was one of the main reasons why Buddhist demonstrations were being prevented and he said, yes, he had mentioned it to the Ambassador. I then suggested that the Government might consider releasing the information in its intelligence reports to the press so that everyone would understand why it was that the Buddhists were being prevented from demonstrating.

14. The President then switched into a more philosophical and less martyred mood and changed the subject. He asked me if I knew what General Lansdale was now doing in the United States. I told him that General Lansdale was still in the Pentagon as Assistant to the Secretary of Defense. He then asked me if I thought the Ambassador might have any objections to General Lansdale's coming out to Vietnam again, if this could be arranged. I said I thought not, since I had discussed this possibility with the Ambassador who had seemed to be favorably impressed with the idea. He also asked what I thought General Harkins' reaction might be to General Lansdale and I said I did not know, but supposed that there would be no objection on the assumption that if he came, he probably would not be primarily concerned with military affairs. This ended the conversation.

15. Comment: Throughout the interview, the President consistently indicated that he was convinced that he was informed accurately (which he was not) in the most minute detail (as he seemed to be). It was clear that he felt that his sincere efforts to take every reasonable action to satisfy any just claims were being willfully disregarded by enemies manipulating the Buddhists, and misinterpreted by Western pressmen because

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of individual animosity against him; and that U. S. Government representatives were giving too much credence to his opponents. Recent stories in the Times of Vietnam accurately reflect his views of the situation. Despite his obvious friendliness throughout the conversation toward me personally, it was most depressing to find him with his mind so closed, and so convinced that he was being unfairly treated.

cc: The Ambassador
Mr. Joseph L. Brent
Mr. John Richardson

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