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EYES ONLY

MEMORANDUM FOR THE AMBASSADOR

SUBJECT: Conversation with General Le Van Kim on 13 November 1963

FROM: Rufus C. Phillips

1. General Kim called me the evening before and asked me to come to see him at his house the next morning at 0700 to talk to me before I saw the Prime Minister, as I had been requested to do.

2. Kim opened the conversation by saying that he hoped I would be able to discuss with the Prime Minister the idea of creating a high level coordinating or directing committee for pacification (counterinsurgency) within the Government. He said that the Generals were in favor of such an idea which he had proposed but were not sure if the Prime Minister would be since it would involve having Minh head the committee.

3. Kim then said that the Military Committee was very sensitive to any feeling on the part of the civilian government or the Americans that they were trying to set up a military dictatorship. They were firmly against any such dictatorship, he said. On the other hand, he continued, obviously certain aspects of the effort had to be taken into firm hands if the war was to be won.

4. Kim said, in this connection, that the Military Committee felt that General Harkins was prepared to level charges of military dictatorship at them at any time. This is, in part, because Harkins had not only been against the coup but was personally against the Military Committee, particularly General Minh. We are not winning the war, Kim said, and we must reorganize the Army and make many other changes if we are to win. Harkins is opposed to any changes because he told so many lies, which he cannot now retract, about how the war was being won. We tried to tell him many times what the true situation was but he would never listen. He said that the Military Committee knew they could accomplish little on the military side without the cooperation of MACV and were afraid that the necessary changes would be opposed.

5. During his regime, President Diem had deliberately split the various military forces and divided the chain of command, Kim said. This needed to be corrected by a reorganization of all the Armed Forces to establish a single chain of command for security forces. At the same time a territorial organization should be set up which would reverse the current pyramidal organization. This is top heavy at Corps level but has only one officer at District level, where the population is. (He drew an upside-down pyramid to illustrate his point and then reversed it.) He

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said he would like to see a military civil team working together in the provinces with civilian province chiefs replacing the existing military ones as soon as capable civilians could be found. These civilians would no longer be oriented towards Saigon, he said, but rather towards the population in their provinces.

6. Kim said that the Military Committee was proceeding slowly and cautiously because they wished to be sure of doing the right thing and of not offending the civilians. He said that some people wanted to see General Minh take credit for the revolution in order to build himself up as a national leader right away, but the people knew that it was not just Minh but the Committee who had made the revolution. The Vietnamese people were more mature and democratic in their political judgment, he said, than most people realized. A leader cannot be forced on to them, he must emerge naturally. Kim said he realized that Vietnam needed a popular leader and that popular enthusiasm was essential to winning the war, but it would be an error to try to artificially create a leader. This was one of the mistakes made with Diem. In the meantime, according to Kim, the Committee was functioning effectively without any serious internal divisions.

Comment: Concerning General Kim's remarks about General Harkins, I suggested that if this was the way the Military Committee truly felt, they should try to work out this problem with you and not tell it to me.

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