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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Conversation with the Prime Minister on 13 November 1963

BY : Rufus C. Phillips

1. The Prime Minister said that he had been told by people in the Government who had worked in the Strategic Hamlet Program before and by the Generals that I was the American to see about the Strategic Hamlets. He said he wanted my frank views and he would give me his. If there was one thing he reproached in the Americans, he said, it was that they were too diplomatic, they seemed unable to say what they meant. Only by a frank exchange of views could we work together successfully, he said.

2. The Prime Minister then began reminiscing about the days of the Binh Xuyen, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai and how he, Col Lansdale and Minh had worked together for President Diem on these problems. He said that afterwards he had remained the President's chief advisor until 1959 when he was pushed aside by Mr. Nhu. He had tried to tell the President that his policies were losing the support of the population in the south but the President only called him and Minh "defeatists" and pushed them further aside.

3. He said it was difficult for the Americans to understand what had happened in the Delta and how the support of the population had been lost there but they must understand this now. The truth was that the Government had been losing the war against the VC in the Delta for some time because it had been losing the population. If one wanted to cite statistics, he said, all one needed to do was to mention the fact that the total number of VC in the area was greater now than two years ago, yet around 20,000 had supposedly been killed during this same period. But beyond that, he said, he knew first hand what had been happening because he personally knew the people of this region, his region, and they had told him clearly over the past two years why more and more people were turning to the VC.

4. He said that his home province of An Giang was an example. The Government through forced labor (as much as 100 days per person) had built the hamlets and many other public works (roads and canals). This cost most people the equivalent of at least 1000 piastres either in cash to pay for substitute labor or in losses suffered because they could not perform other work. At the same time the VC only collected 50 to 100 piastres in taxes. Naturally the people supported the VC -- why would they support a Government which was worse than the VC. Many people had come to him, he said, and had broken down in tears over the situation.

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GROUP 4
Downgraded to CONFIDENTIAL
after 3 years; UNCLASSIFIED
after 12 years.

When Tho would report this to the President, he would be shown long lists of signatures on supposed petitions from people who had "volunteered" their labor. Tho told him that these were fake documents specially prepared by the Province Chief. The President would then talk about his trips to the province and how he was always welcomed by the population. When Tho would try to tell him that it was nothing but a "mise en scene," he would not listen, and would repeat that Tho was a "defeatist."

5. Not only did these practices alienate the people, Tho said, but the previous policy of divide and rule employed against the major religious groups (the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai and the Catholics), as well as against the Khmer ethnic minority, was disastrous. Minh and he, Tho said, had begged the President to allow them to arm them, particularly the Hoa Hao, because they were so firmly anti-communist. The President had been on the point of agreeing, Tho said, when Minh persuaded him that he could not trust us (Minh and Tho) or the Hoa Hao. The Hoa Hao became discouraged because they were not helped and because when they identified a communist in their midst and turned him over to the provincial authorities he would bribe the responsible government official and be released.

6. Now, Tho said, we must avoid the mistakes of the past. American aid has been rapid and efficient but not always intelligent. Above all we need intelligent assistance and firm support for what is right. The Americans must stand up for their own democratic principles and must always insist that what we do helps and not harms our own people, Tho said.

7. The implementation of the strategic hamlet program must be revised, Tho said. We must find a way to lift up the burden placed on our people and we must somehow pay them for their work. Both General Minh and I are realistic, he said. We realize that we too have lost much of the trust of our former supporters in the Delta. The people there have little faith in anyone -- the Diem Government was but the last in a long string of Governments of broken promises beginning with the French Colonial Government at the beginning of World War II and continuing through those of Bao Dai.

8. The main ideas for the Delta which General Minh and I have in mind, Tho said, are as follows:

a. We will correct the abuses of the past government, such as forced labor, and we will do everything possible to raise the morale of the population in the Delta to give them faith in the Government. This they do not now have.

b. There is a real need for aggressive local militia seeking out the VC in their areas. As fast as we can be assured of their political loyalty we will train and arm the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai population in the Delta and the remaining Catholic groupings not already armed. Their mission

will be mainly local security. We will also win the support of the Khmers and train and arm them -- at present they are neutral for the most part.

c. We will concentrate on the economic and social development of the hamlets already built to raise the morale of the people; and at the same provide them with better security which they do not now have.

d. We will organize a special effort in the Camau Peninsula to disrupt the VC bases there because this is the main source of funds and trained recruits for the entire VC effort in the Delta. We will do this by training special ranger groups, mainly composed of Hoa Hao, already familiar with the area, who will carry the fight to the VC. They will be backed up by mobile, regular military units to strike against VC concentrations.

e. We will build more hamlets and we may move some which are now poorly placed but this will be done very selectively and the people will be aid for their work. There will be no more corvee labor.

f. We will form a high-level directing and coordinating committee within the Government for the overall pacification effort.

9. The Prime Minister then asked me to contact Bui Van Luong as soon as possible to discuss with him in detail the hamlet program. Luong's appointment was temporary, Tho said, for about two months to assist in an orderly transfer of the program and of the experience gained with it during the previous government. Tho said there would be a meeting at the end of this week between the Government and the Military Committee to make policy decisions concerning the Strategic Hamlet Program.

10. During the conversation, I mentioned the actions taken to resume aid as instructed by Mr. Brent. I also responded to the Prime Minister's request for specific opinions in regard to the Strategic Hamlet Program as follows:

a. The Government should form a high level committee to direct the overall pacification effort of which the Strategic Hamlet Program is a major part.

b. The Government should concentrate initially on consolidating existing hamlets and providing them with adequate security and the economic and social benefits promised.

c. I agreed with him completely that there must be no more corvee labor, that further work should be compensated for in some manner and that USCM would do everything it could to help the Government raise the morale and win the support of the population in the Delta which was the key to defeating the communists in that area.

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11. Comment: The Prime Minister had obviously been thinking about the problem of pacifying the Delta for many years, and from his constant references to General Minh it was clear that there was a considerable identity of views between them. My impression was that he had a complete grasp of the political realities in the Delta and that for the first time solid progress can be achieved in that area if the U.S. can develop a military and civilian aid program sufficiently flexible to give support when and where needed. I also received the impression, although he did not specifically so state, that the Prime Minister expects General Minh to head the high-level pacification committee.

cc:The Ambassador
Mr. J.L.Brent
Mr.W.Trueheart

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