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EYES ONLY

MEMORANDUM FOR THE AMBASSADOR

November 7, 1963
(November 13, 1963)

SUBJECT: The Increasing Ineffectiveness of the United States in Vietnam

FROM: Bohannon

1. Since April of this year there has been a continuing decrease in US effectiveness--i.e., in US officials' ability to influence constructively, in the US interest, the actions of Vietnamese officials. In part this has been due to Vietnamese officials lacking an understanding of necessary actions and how to take them; in part it has been due to apparently deliberate attempts to reduce US influence by a few officials, notably Counsellor Nhu and certain of his sycophants; and in part it has been the result of incidents over which neither Vietnamese nor American officials had any significant measure of control. The critical ingredient omnipresent has been the action, or lack of action, of US representatives. Lest this appear overweening arrogance, or conversely, captious criticism, I shall attempt as briefly as the long tale will allow to point out some of the more conspicuous examples.

2. In April, as reported with less than concealed jubilation in Embtel 929, the GVN agreed to support from its funds (made available to them through the commercial import and other programs) the civilian counterinsurgency effort. This effectively removed this program, the value and requirements of which have never been fully understood by the vast majority of GVN officials, from US control. USOM Rural Affairs voiced its strong opposition to this action in subdued tones in a memorandum for the record written, alas, after the fact. As the agency responsible for conceiving and implementing the program, it had not been consulted. Experience of the past six months has demonstrated that the United States, or at least their representatives, were so politically inept that he could ignore or flout them at will. (He could scarcely have imagined, however, that we would be so inept as to allow matters to reach their (and his) present state.)

3. The impression that we were unable to provide effective guidance became increasingly strong after the May 8 incident. It is true that US officials rather generally recognized its disastrous possible consequences, as indeed did many Vietnamese. It is also true, and it was duly noted, that we confined our guidance to diplomatically genteel protestations, allowing the position of the GVN and the stature of the US to deteriorate at a substantially equal rate. We were almost daily subjected to provocation, and our ineffectual response went far to increase the conviction

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Downgraded at 12-year intervals,
not automatically declassified.

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but will be generally regarded as another "Made in America" item, or alternatively, as further evidence of US inability or unwillingness to act effectively to help the people of Vietnam. After 5 full days in power, its achievements appear to be:

- (1) Immediate spontaneous rejoicing by street crowds.
- (2) Maintenance of order, which was never seriously threatened.
- (3) Seriously annoying many of the influential politically oriented civilians and of students.
- (4) No effective action designed to capitalize on popular enthusiasm, and gain genuine support from religious and youth groups.

c. The new government, and its officials, once assured of their grasp of power, will be under intense political and psychological pressure to demonstrate their independence from American influence. This will to some extent necessitate, and in many other instances may be used to justify, rebuffs of US proposals. Further, it may seriously reduce, within a year, the effectiveness of US advisors by rendering their continuing presence with their Vietnamese counterpart embarrassing to the latter.

7. We have not won the war in Vietnam. We can still lose it, and not slowly. The next few months, indeed the next few weeks, are critical.

8. The odds may be against us, but we can still win. To do so, other than by accident, will require intelligent, courageous, unorthodox actions in many fields. These must be based on a realization that the US is as much on the spot for this coup as it was for the Bay of Pigs, and that the consequences to the US of inaction here and now may be fully as great. Those actions which are imperative, and of the greatest urgency, are:

a. Official expression of deepest regret for the death of Diem, and unofficial, but not secret, insistence that those who killed him be brought to justice.

b. Assignment of a few fulltime advisors, knowledgeable in the ways of Asian revolutionary politics, to those key leaders whom the US desires to see in power. Occasional top level guidance, no matter how wise, cannot substitute for day by day assistance in solving their problems in ways understandable and acceptable to these key individuals. These advisors must be given wide discretionary latitude within the framework of general guidance on US objectives, and maximum support.

c. Establishment of an operations coordination group which will

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make available to these advisors on a 24-hour basis, if necessary, the information and assistance of the US agencies, and through whom policy guidance and recommendations to and from the Ambassador can be channelled for immediate action by the agencies or individuals concerned.

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A week has passed since the foregoing was written, and the situation in some ways seems brighter. Our advice and assistance is being sought, and we seem to have averted some of the major problems, such as the threatened downgrading, in effect abandonment, of such key elements as the Strategic Hamlet and Chieu Hoi programs. This is only a beginning. The conclusions and recommendations above seem more than ever cogent, and urgent. The need for coordinated, understanding, advice and assistance, and the chances for it to be effective, are even greater than they were.

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