

S E C R E T

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

November 20, 1963

FROM: Rufus C. Phillips

SUBJECT: Conversation with General Duong Van Minh on 18 November 1963

1. I was informed by General Kim on 17 November that General Minh would like to see me on the 18th. The appointment was originally scheduled for 1700 and moved up to 1100 by a call from General Minh's aide that same morning.

2. General Minh, whom I have known personally since 1955, was extremely cordial and friendly. He spoke very personally about how he was now playing a role that he had never wanted to play, how he had been the chief instrument of a coup that he had always wished to avoid. He recalled our last conversation together at a dinner at General Kim's house some 8 months ago in which he had remarked that the Diem Government was in a very steep nose-dive and it was questionable whether it could be pulled out in time. He said that he did not know the answer yet. The new government, he stated, had inherited a truly formidable task beyond what any outsider could realize.

3. Concerning the Strategic Hamlet Program, General Minh said that he had always been in favor of the basic concept which was good, but that it had been misapplied by the previous government and exploited for personal political gain by Mr. Nhu. He agreed that it was absolutely necessary to fulfill the implied promises given to that part of the population involved in the program and to consolidate existing hamlets. At the same time, in those areas in the Delta where mass relocation had occurred, he felt that people should be given the choice of returning to their original homes if they really wanted to do so, or of staying in the Strategic Hamlets. He said that Central Vietnam was best suited for the program but that the concept should not have been applied indiscriminately in all parts of the Delta. In those parts of the Delta where people's homes were widely dispersed, a system of constant small unit patrolling combined with armed local militia was the best answer.

4. Minh stated that it was important to fit the strategic hamlet into an overall concept of pacification, and to understand that pacification, not spectacular combat actions against the VC, was the main mission of the military forces. He said that the VC were not afraid of spectacular operations involving large units but were afraid of small combat actions and civic action operations which would disrupt and destroy their support organization, both outside and within existing strategic hamlets. The way to break up their organization was to win the support of the population by working with them and gaining their confidence.

5. To carry out pacification successfully, according to Minh, the Army would have to be reorganized on a territorial basis. The existing inverted

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pyramid of enormous staff organization at corps and division level would have to be reversed and responsibilities decentralized. The corps were staffed by "bureaucrats" not soldiers. He said that units would be assigned to a defined area and given a pacification mission within that area for an extended period of time. Small unit highly mobile operations would be emphasized. He envisaged that there would be greater decentralization of responsibility to subordinate echelons, that they would be given the authority to operate without constant reference to higher headquarters. This would also apply to the province chiefs. If officials at the province and unit level fail to produce results, then they would be replaced, but no longer would they be required to constantly refer to higher echelons or to Saigon.

6. General Minh said that one of the greatest problems the new regime faced was the lack of qualified civil or military personnel to accept responsible positions in the provinces. He said he would prefer to have civilians as district chiefs and province chiefs, if at all possible. In this connection, he wondered what had happened to all the NIA (National Institute of Administration) graduates and where they were. The problem is that they are so understaffed with qualified people. He said he would very much like to have a list of these people and where they were now. He was also interested in special training courses for civilian and military district chiefs.

7. What made the task of picking up and carrying on from the previous government particularly difficult was the widespread corruption existing in the provinces, according to Minh. Practically everybody had been involved, he said. Now the problem was what to do with these people because they were, for the most part, also the only trained administrators and technicians in Vietnam. He indicated that the new government intended to punish the most flagrant cases and transfer others to different provinces. Hereafter, he said, instead of permitting this type of corruption to continue, the first few province chiefs caught stealing would be shot. This might seem a bloody solution, he stated, but it was necessary to make examples. At this point I suggested that if he could make an example of a relative of some high official in the new government, this would be even more impressive. Minh said that the Americans had no idea how extensive corruption had been under the previous government or the effect it had had on the morale of the population. He said that many province and district chiefs had sold MAP barbed wire to the population who knew very well that the barbed wire had been given free by the US. One thing that a lot of people have never realized, he said, is that the average peasant is very intelligent. He knows when he is being robbed, and he knows the difference between good and bad government. The population in the countryside asks very little, only an opportunity to farm their rice fields in peace and that they were very cooperative if treated justly. He cited two particular cases of corruption as examples. In the Province of

Nhatrang, the old province chief had apparently demanded a substantial pay-off to grant licenses to sell either rice or fish in the province. This had, in effect, created two monopolies. When the old Province Chief was removed many individuals came to the new one to ask permission to sell their rice. When the new province chief told them that anyone who wanted to sell their products could do so without restriction, people actually broke down and cried. He said the corruption in higher circles of the government had been even worse. For instance, General Don had already been approached by a group of Chinese who wanted his cooperation in continuing to monopolize the Camau charcoal trade. They had offered to give 50,000,000 piastres to the Army and 20,000,000 piastres to General Don. He said that this was typical of the way things had been done under the previous government.

8. Minh said that the only way to correct this kind of abuse was to re-orient officials in the provinces and to carry out not only announced but also surprise inspections. He said that he agreed that it was necessary to get out into the provinces, see what was going on and make on-the-spot corrections. He said he would do this personally. The previous government, he felt, had had little contact with the population. Most officials were constantly looking over their shoulder to Saigon. These attitudes would have to be changed. He again reiterated that he intended to play a leading role in this by making personal inspections in the field. He said that changing the attitudes of most government officials towards the population was perhaps the most important task the government had to accomplish.

9. In the Delta, General Minh stated, the new government's policy would be to help groups such as the Hoa Hao to defend their home areas. This would be a major objective. At the same time, an improved approach to pacification would be tried in other areas. He said that he would select Long An as a model province for the new approach because it was one of the toughest and was, as the same time, accessible to Saigon. Captain Dao, soon to be promoted to Major, and currently General Le Van Kim's aide, was to be selected as Province Chief. Minh also said that a special effort would be made in the Camau region, utilizing Hoa Hao commands along with mobile regular forces to break up VC support operations. He said that the main support for almost everything the VC did in the Delta came from their Camau base. At the same time they would attempt, he said, to break the back of the charcoal racket. He said influential people had been involved in this since 1954 and were, in effect, on the VC payroll. It would be difficult and complicated because the Chinese were also involved.

10. Comment: Nothing in General Minh's personal manner that the writer could notice, has changed since he became the Chief of State. He

is as unpretentious and candid as in the past. He obviously has no illusions about the difficulties ahead or that the main task of leadership falls on him. He is still the only top Vietnamese leader, known to the writer, who projects the personal warmth and sympathy required to stir popular enthusiasm in Vietnam. The man has the necessary elements of a popular leader in his character but he will have to be pushed into assuming this role because he is essentially a humble man.

cc: The Ambassador
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