

(Not sent by President Kennedy)

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9/12/63

DRAFT LETTER TO PRESIDENT DIEM

Dear Mr. President:

1. I am sending you this letter because of the gravity of the situation which now confronts our two countries, in their relations to each other. For us in the United States, difficult and painful decisions cannot long be put off, and I know that you on your side have problems of similar gravity. Moreover, it is clear to me as I work on this problem that many of its difficulties arise from uncertainty and error in assessing the real facts of the situation. Both of our Governments, for different reasons, face great difficulties on this score. And so I think it may be important and helpful for you to know accurately just how the situation now appears to me. In return, I shall greatly value the most candid expression of your own assessment and it may well be that you and I between us can work out a new understanding in place of the present troubled, confused and dangerous relation between our Governments.

2. At the outset, let me state plainly that the central purpose of my Government in all of its relations to your country is that the Communists should be defeated in their brazen effort to capture your country by force and fraud of all varieties. What we do and do not do, whether it seems right or wrong to our friends is always animated by this central purpose. You may remember that my great predecessor Abraham Lincoln once explained to a newspaperman the depth of this

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- 2 -

commitment to the preservation of the American union by saying that even on the great issue of slavery what he did or did not do was governed by his judgment of its value in ending the division of our country. The United States Government gives that kind of priority to the defeat of the Communists, in all that it does in its relations with your country.

3. This purpose, in a general way, has been a part of American policy toward your country for many years, but as you know it took a new shape and clarity at the end of the year 1961. At that time, in the light of the very unsatisfactory situation in the neighboring country of Laos, and in view of the increasing efforts then being made by the Viet Cong, I sent two of my most trusted associates on a careful mission of inquiry to your country. The mission of General Taylor and Mr. Rostow was to give me the best possible judgment of the course of the struggle in South Vietnam and the prospect of success. Their comprehensive report convinced me finally, first that the situation was indeed very serious, and second that by appropriate and determined action your Government and ours together could find a way to victory. Our two Governments then worked out together, and you and I as their leaders formally approved, a new level of effort and cooperation. And I think it is fair to say that both our Governments have been loyal to that effort, to the limit of their abilities, ever since.

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- 3 -

4. By the hardest kind of joint effort, in which of course your people have borne the heavier and the more immediate responsibility, the contest against the Communists in the last year and a half has gradually but steadily turned in our favor. New levels of alertness and skill were developed in the forces of your country, and the bold and imaginative program of strategic hamlets was pressed forward with steadily increasing energy and speed. Each of us, I am sure, pays close attention to our reports from all over the country on the course of the struggle against the Viet Cong, and I am sure that these reports agree on the basic proposition that the war has been going well, at least until very recently. And since newspaper reports and the problem of the press generally are an important element of difficulty in our relations, it is only fair for me to say that I have been as much irritated as I am sure you must have been, by frequent and inaccurate reports, in important and responsible U. S. newspapers and magazines, which tend to disparage unfairly and inaccurately the effectiveness of our joint effort against the Viet Cong.

5. A great cooperative effort of the kind in which we have been engaged is never easy for the representatives of separate sovereign states. On the one hand, the struggle is Vietnamese at its center, not American. You and your Government have responsibilities, as Vietnamese

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- 4 -

and to Vietnam, which are evidently different from those which I and my Government have as Americans for America. At the point of immediate battle, when one of our pilots or advisors is in the same danger as your soldiers, these lines of division tend to fade and even disappear, but further back the differences are real and not wholly avoidable. I have read with interest cables from Ambassador Nolting in which he has reported your own awareness of this difficulty and your deep concern with it. I want you to know that I too see this problem. In particular, I recognize that it must be a matter of real difficulty for proud members of your Government to find large numbers of Americans holding positions of considerable responsibility and authority in matters which are of great immediate importance to the people of Vietnam. I well understand your insistence upon avoiding, in our relations, anything that could nourish any revival among your people of the colonial spirit of acceptance of foreign domination. And while no doubt there have been occasional examples of overzealousness and even of misplaced arrogance among Americans in South Vietnam, I want you to know that I have personally assured myself that the top men, in every department and agency concerned, fully understand my determination that Americans in Vietnam shall act in full respect for the independence of your country and for the proper determination of your people to be free of domination even by their friends. At the same time, as you

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- 5 -

know, we cannot avoid the necessity for extensive participation by our representatives in a situation in which our own resources, and thousands of members of our armed forces, are so heavily committed. I have been grateful for your ability to understand and respect our necessities, just as I have tried to respect yours.

6. In the last four months, by a series of events which neither you nor I can have wished and whose impact is surely a matter of equal regret to us both, a new and grave set of difficulties has been created for us both. It is not my purpose here to recount in detail events with which you yourself are familiar, nor even to repeat expressions of concern, which you have heard many times from Ambassador Nolting and Ambassador Lodge, on the existing situation and dangers, within your country. It is a fact, as I found it necessary to say publicly two weeks ago, that we in our Government are gravely troubled by the danger that some of the methods used by some members of your Government may be creating a situation in which it will not be possible to sustain public support in Vietnam for the struggle against the Communists. But you will feel, I am sure, that you have a right to your own judgment on this matter, and it is not likely that in a single message from this distance I can change your mind. What I must do, however, is to make clear the effect of these recent events upon the situation here in the United States and upon the possibilities of action open to me.

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-6-

7. At the present time it is a fact that unless there can be important changes and improvements in the apparent relation between the Government and the people in your country, opinion here, in the public and in the Congress, will make it impossible for me to continue without change the great cooperative programs which we have been pressing together since 1961. I have said publicly that we do not wish to cut off our aid programs at this time, and I shall not change this position except as such change becomes necessary in response to the democratic processes of this country. But it would be wrong for me not to let you know that such change is inevitable unless the situation in Vietnam can somehow take a major turn for the better.

8. At a minimum, and within a short period of time, it will become necessary for this Government to take actions which make it clear that American cooperation and American assistance will not be given to or through individuals whose acts and words seem to run against the purpose of genuine reconciliation and unified national effort against the Communists. This is so not because we wish to interfere in your affairs, but because without such limitations and modifications it will become impossible for us to keep on with our major effort in support of your country. Unless I can show the American people that the United States is wholly dissociated from acts which have raised grave questions here, I do not think I can sustain public support for the central effort.

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- 7 -

9. It may well be your view that American opinion is misled, and I recognize that this is always a possibility in a world in which the accurate judgment of distant events is very difficult. But that leads me to urge upon you as strongly as I can that the only way to correct this difficulty is to allow more and not less reporting by Americans in your country. If there is one principle upon which my people are united, by Constitutional commitment, conviction, and tradition, it is that the way to get at the truth is to let people see for themselves. At present, acting on feelings which are human and understandable, and working from a tradition which is quite different from our own, your Government is engaged in a limitation and censorship of news, and in a harassment of reports, which can only have -- and is having -- the most destructive effects upon confidence between our two peoples. I repeat that I yield to no one in my understanding of the irritation which tendentious reporting can cause, but I cannot overemphasize to you the damage which is done to your own cause and to our common purpose by limitations of this sort. No single step would do more to reopen the path to effective cooperation than an immediate and complete abandonment of all restrictions upon the flow of news to and from our countries.

10. There is much more that needs to be talked out between our two countries on these grave matters. I am asking Ambassador Lodge

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- 8 -

to make every effort to be at your disposal for further discussion, and of course I shall warmly welcome a direct expression of your personal views in a message to me at any time. I do not suppose that when two independent nations reach a grave level of disagreement the fault can ever lie on one side only, and you will not find us rigid or unresponsive in the effort to reestablish and to sustain in the future the cooperation which has, until lately, had such strikingly effective results. I repeat that it remains the central purpose of the United States in its friendly relation to South Vietnam to defeat the aggressive designs of the Communists.