

USAID/Tunis
Dept of State
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Dear Rufus:

Earl Young came through here last weekend on his way for another tour in Viet Nam, this time in Danang as liaison officer with the Marines. Needless to say we discussed the Vietnamese situation in detail, and I felt a strong desire to touch base with you and compare notes.

First, Earl described the situation in AID/W and in the USOM in Saigon as being an example of a "U.S. Government nervous breakdown" on the subject of Viet Nam. Obviously the USAID is vastly overstaffed, and the organizational chart now looks like some hens had dipped their feet in ink and walked all over the page. In this connection, I have received letters from Bert Fraleigh who was highly fed up. On top of this, I read in the New York Herald Tribune an article indicating that Ed Lansdale has been left without either funds or authority and is thus unable to bring pressure to bear on either the Americans or the Vietnamese. In the interest of getting your estimate on the situation, I would venture a few views of my own. I think it is sometimes an advantage to be forcibly removed from the scene in order to have clear ideas about the situation.

As I see it, there are three real essential elements to the U.S. effort. These are, in increasing order of importance: (1) a commercial import program to keep the economy above water and deter inflation; (2) a U.S. military effort to meet the immediate, practical threat of enemy military forces; and (3) the necessity to create a viable Vietnamese indigenous political "base" among the population. All other programs and projects not directly concerned with one of these three objectives would seem to me to be of lesser importance. Of the three the most essential in the long run is the last one, and I presume this is what Ed and possibly Ambassador Lodge have been attempting to concentrate on. In this connection, I recently read two books which I found of extreme fascination on the whole Viet Nam problem. These books cover the period 1945-1950, i.e., the return of the French and the turning point of their war with the evacuation of Cao Bang and the loss of R.C.4. The books are by Lucien Bodard who was the most experienced of the French correspondents and were written in French for a French audience. Since they were written 15 or more years after the events described, there is a very considerable degree of objectivity in the way Bodard describes the various efforts on all levels that were made to defeat the Viet Minh. Bodard, of course, recognizes that the entire effort was doomed because it flew in the face of Vietnamese nationalism, but nevertheless many of the strategic and tactical problems are similar to those being faced today, and as regards the basic cultural contexts in Viet Nam, the books are vastly more sophisticated than the kind of stuff that has been written from Bernard Fall on down to Joe Alsop. As a general background to present events, I thought they were superb. The titles are "L'Enlissement" and "L'Humiliation".

Last July I heard briefly from Ambassador Lodge and half expected to be called back to Viet Nam. More recently my name apparently was considered again by Stoneman and Mann, but without apparent outcome. After what Earl Young had to say, I have serious question as to whether anybody could do anything useful in a USAID context in any position less than that of Director, and any such Director would have to reorganize the entire operation, hopefully sending about 500 people home. Now that I read that Ed Lansdale has not been given adequate support and with all I hear of the infighting of all elements of the U.S. Team, I really worry. Honolulu may have been a useful exercise in selling the war to the American people, but I think it could also be very mischievous in the long run in perpetuating the myth that two chickens in every cooking pot in the countryside and a Cadillac in every Minister's garage will necessarily change anything in the political-military aspect of the present struggle. To me it is obvious that the only solution either for winning the war in the first place or for being able to pull out at some future time is the creation of a viable South Vietnamese political organization. In my view it cannot be merely a reconstruction of a governmental system such as that which existed under Diem, but it must incorporate real elements of revolution and reform, the inadequate presence of which fatally undermined the Diem regime. Putting it in another way, it seems that there may have to be a fundamental dispersion of the ruling minority which composed the Diem government, its predecessors, and its successors by some system which would admit the "people" to the sharing of power even at the senior levels of the Vietnamese administration, not just in the hamlets. And it does seem to me, as it has ever since November 1, 1963, that our number one priority is the creation - to the extent that foreigners can do it - of a revolutionary, political regime and administration in South Viet Nam. I had optimistically assumed that Lansdale would be turned loose to do this, but I gather from the New York Tribune that his hands are largely tied. If such is the case, I wonder whether if he resigned from the U.S. Government and was hired by the Vietnamese, a la Wolf Ladejinsky, he might be able to overcome these obstacles by working entirely through the Vietnamese side. I suppose, however, that there would be powerful American pressures to have his passport picked up if anything so sensible was proposed. There would also be the problem of how much the power elements in Viet Nam would really push his ideas if he could not back them up with either money or power. Undoubtedly there are still "pure" elements left among the Vietnamese, but they are probably not overabundant, and money and power talk loud in Vietnam as elsewhere.

Here in Tunisia we have a very different situation. Tunisia is blessed with a remarkably honest and dedicated governmental structure, with real party discipline right down to the village level, and an exceptionally skillful, dedicated and pragmatic politician at the top. If Diem had been a Bourguiba and if the Can Lao had been the Destour Party, Viet Nam would be a happy and prosperous country today, and McNamara would be making fewer trips to Southeast Asia - both of which are objectives devoutly to be sought.

Our program here is, of course, less urgent than that of Saigon. To attempt to satisfy my adventurous cravings, I fly airplanes and do a lot of scuba diving for Roman antiquities in which the Mediterranean abounds. I live in a beautiful little villa overlooking the Mediterranean with a garden full of bougainvillea, orange trees, palm trees, etc. I imported from Finland an indoor sauna which occupies one guest room, but there is still another larger guest room awaiting you and Barbara. From Rome or Paris it's only an hour plus to arrive in Tunisia, the land of uncluttered beaches, camels, and undisturbed Roman cities. Mr. Mokhtar Latiri, Chief of the Public Works here, is always hiring U.S. engineering firms. He is young and aggressive and would highly impress you. You should come out here and get on his list so that when he builds the odd airport, Virginia gets some of the benefit. In any case, please send a line and advise me as to the solution of the Vietnamese problem in a few well-chosen words.

All the best,

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P.S. An extraordinary thing happened here which will interest you. We recently received word without warning that two senior evaluators were coming out from Washington, and one of them turned out to be Jim Killen. Needless to say, I was apprehensive after all the struggles that had occurred regarding Viet Nam, but it has not worked out as I feared. In fact, if he had talked in 1964 about Viet Nam the way he talks now, he would have avoided all kinds of trouble. He seems a much, much mellowed man. I note that his invalid wife recently died, which may have been a blessing in disguise. In any case, he made statements like "you can't really understand much about a country until you have been there one year at least," etc. I opposed him strongly in the past, and therefore want to do him justice now.