

4 March 1970

Mr. Murray Chotiner,
Special Assistant to the President
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Chotiner:

It has been suggested that I might write you concerning the case in Viet-Nam of Tron Ngoc Chau, since I have known Chau personally since 1962. At that time I was the Assistant Director of USAID/Viet-Nam for Rural Affairs and Counterinsurgency and got to know Chau very well as the best Province Chief in Viet-Nam. I left USAID in late 1963 for private business, but returned to Viet-Nam during 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968 for brief stints as a consultant and temporary member of Ed Lansdale's Team in the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. During my visits, I saw a good deal of Chau who had a responsible position in the Pacification program and then ran as a Congressman from Fien Hoa Province in 1967 winning an honest landslide victory. This was the Province in which he had been Province Chief during the Diem regime, and his victory was a testament to the popular support he had generated. This is particularly significant because Chau is from Central Viet-Nam, but Kien-Hoa province is in the Delta where the people traditionally do not take to Vietnamese from the north or center. I cite this to give you a feel for Chau's ability and potential as a nationalist, anti-communist political leader.

Over the years I have had many long philosophical and political talks with Chau and know him as a Vietnamese patriot and nationalist. He was, and I am sure remains, a firm anticommunist. His whole adult life has been devoted to fighting them. That he would attempt to woo his brother away from the Viet-Cong without betraying him and that he would try to establish some common ground for a reconciliation with the non hard-core elements in the Viet-Cong is not inconsistent, in Vietnamese terms, with either his anticommunism or his nationalism. He has long felt that the nationalist Vietnamese should take their destiny into their own hands and not depend on the Americans for salvation, and that they should be self-confident enough to deal directly with the North.

This is "Vietnamization" with enough guts in it to have a chance of ultimately working.

Now, Chau is in the process of being sacrificed to an apparent personal vendetta by President Thieu to get him by whatever means. It is natural that those who know Chau would find the situation personally objectionable; however, there are larger reasons beyond those connected with Chau as a person for the United States to intervene in this affair which concern the impact of the Chau case on U.S. public opinion and on the continued stability of the Thieu regime. The success of "Vietnamization" depends on both.

The spectacle of the Thieu Government flouting the Vietnamese Constitution both by withdrawing Chau's immunity by an extra-constitutional procedure of doubtful legality, and then by changing the entire basis on which he is being charged at the last minute, cannot but convince an increasing number of Americans that the Thieu Government is not a regime worth the expenditure of more American lives. This feeling is likely to increase public pressure on President Nixon for a withdrawal of American troops at a rate greater than Vietnamese capabilities for replacement.

Possibly of even greater seriousness is the internal political effects in Viet-Nam of President Thieu's actions. His open attempts to cow the National Assembly and to rig legal procedures are certain to erode the all too-narrow base of political support which he currently enjoys. He is making many of the same mistakes President Diem made, but without Diem's nationalist standing and prestige. If we continue to stand by and to appear to be giving tacit approval while he disembowels the present Vietnamese constitution, which most of the Vietnamese leadership look upon as their last hope and chance to achieve a nationhood worth fighting for, we are going to see a political collapse in Viet-Nam on our side which will make a mockery of the President's hopes for "Vietnamization".

As an American with service in Viet-Nam which began in 1954, who has no axe to grind and who has continuously supported our commitment to the freedom of the Vietnamese people since 1954, I feel impelled to tell you frankly that in resting the success of "Vietnamization" upon the uncritical and non-discriminating support of the Thieu regime as presently constituted, President Nixon is risking almost certain failure. The Chau case is the most visible symptom of a general political malaise growing out of bad Vietnamese leadership with which the present U.S. Embassy in Saigon is either unable or unwilling to cope.

I have nothing against President Thieu personally and I do not advocate his overthrow which would destroy the constitutional basis for government in Viet Nam and produce chaos. What I do advocate is knowledgeable, non-diplomatic, behind the scenes intervention and pressure on

Thieu and his entourage to stop trying to eliminate other Nationalist leaders, but instead to start providing a basis for cooperation. In the case of Chau it is probably too late to keep him in Viet-Nam in some useful role - possibly the best that could be done would be a face saving compromise of exile instead of imprisonment which would at least help keep the case from further undermining support for the Vietnamese Government and U.S. policy. It would also be a sign that the U.S. has some principles and stands by its friends.

I cannot do justice in a letter to a description of how to get the Vietnamese leadership to take proper and effective political actions and to live up to the tenets of their own Constitution. There is one person residing in the Washington area who does truly know better than any other American - Ed Lansdale. This letter is being written without his knowledge but I suggest that his advice be solicited before it is too late for anything effective to be done in Viet-Nam.

Sincerely yours,

Rufus C. Phillips, III
President

RCF:jh