

April 30, 1960

H. E. Ngo Dinh Diem
President of the Republic of Vietnam
Independence Palace
Saigon, Vietnam

Mr. President and very dear friend:

Although I feel sure that Mr. Ladejinsky, Ambassador Chuong, and others have kept you informed in general of what I have written and said over the past several months, I believe it is time that I wrote you again directly. My last letter to you was written more than six weeks ago; I apologize for not writing to you more frequently.

Recently I had the pleasant opportunity to meet with Nguyen Dinh Thuan and Vu Van Thai while they were in Washington and New York. As you know, their visit was quite successful, due in large measure to their superb ability to explain the situation in Vietnam persuasively to significant audiences in both Government and business circles. I was present at some of their sessions, and had occasion to speak with others who were involved in the meetings I did not attend. I can report to you that all who met and talked with them were impressed by the urgency of your cause. At the same time, I would not, were I you, look for immediate results of major importance. Rather, it is safe to say that had they not made this visit to the United States, certain unfavorable things might have occurred with respect to our policy vis-a-vis Vietnam.

The truth of the matter is that a great deal of uneasiness with respect to Vietnam exists today in official and business circles. There are four major elements which contribute to this attitude, and I outline them for you herewith:

1. Weakness of leadership: there is much criticism of the failure of your Ministers and of civil servants generally to accept responsibility and to act on their own initiative -- which, you will certainly remember, is something you and I have discussed countless times over the years. With only a handful of exceptions your Ministers are regarded as sycophants -- courtiers who regard their jobs as too important to them for them to chance your anger should they act boldly, make a mistake, and have to account to you for it. Again, this is a problem you and I have often pondered. Its solution lies in the hearts and minds of the men involved, and in yourself as well. Certainly the fact that Vice President Tho, Secretary of State Thuan, Vu Van Thai, and a few others who are also men of courage are counted among your aides is evidence that you subscribe to the principle that a strong leader likes strong aides. I will add, in the utmost candour as always, that ranking officials and business leaders in the United States who are interested in your welfare and in the future of your people and your country, have paid close attention to the nature of your Ministers and other senior officials. Indeed, much of the support you continue to receive from such men as Senator Mansfield, Senator Fulbright, and other members of Congress, or from present or potential investors of significance, results from their assessment of the strength of the character, honesty, integrity, and ability of such men as those whom I have named above. Similarly, indications of dishonesty, corruption, graft, and other self-seeking activity on the part of certain other persons are scrutinized soberly and painstakingly,

by these same men. I cannot stress this fact too strongly. I wish I were with you in Saigon at this moment so that I might discuss it with you more frankly, for it is dangerous to spell out these matters in a letter.

2. Slowing of democratic development: you know from reading my recent articles that I understand fairly well the situation in your country and the reasons that you have adopted the policies of your regime. It must be said, however, that my interpretations of developments and policies in Vietnam are not always shared by other experts here. Naturally, they do not know you or your philosophies as I do, and they tend to be more skeptical of your motivation and of your sincerity of purpose. At the recent meetings of the Association for Asian Studies (the organization which you addressed in Cleveland in 1952), I was questioned sharply about the "dictatorship" in Vietnam. The events of this past week in Korea have brought Vietnam more sharply into the public picture, and one must expect reflected activity as a consequence of the Korean revolution. I presume you are prepared for such occurrences. One can only guess at the form they will take -- Communist propaganda stressing the authoritarian character of your government and crying for "democratic reforms", or perhaps other, non-Communist, political activity, as by some of the "intellectuals" in the opposition in Saigon, taking advantage of worldwide interest in Korea to call attention of the international press, for example, to the situation in Vietnam. Again, one can only guess, but it would seem safe to predict that some action will occur soon. (See also my remarks about your Ambassador, below.)

3. The security situation: I have been carefully questioned by my friends in Washington concerning the "deterioration" in internal security in Vietnam. Among other things which I have been asked are the following: Is the security crisis genuine? Or is it faked because you want more American aid (much as the French were accustomed to stage a "crisis" just as the U. S. Congress was about to pass on Mutual Security aid to France/Indochina between 1950 and 1954)? If the crisis is indeed genuine, does it indicate that your regime is failing? That it is disintegrating? That popular support for your government is declining? That the Communists are more active? And so on

In this connection, M. Bernard Fall is preparing a sharply critical article on Vietnam. In New York the other day he boasted publicly that when he wrote about the deterioration of security in The Nation magazine some two years ago -- and I had contradicted his interpretations and his facts at that time -- he had been right and I had been wrong! Now he intends to prove that your government is about to fall; that the people oppose you; that corruption is rife in your regime; that your "government en famille" is destroying all possibility of democratic growth in Vietnam; that his map of terrorist activity in Vietnam (which he published in Pacific Affairs in 1957, was correct; and that, furthermore, he has once more secured from Confidential French files similar evidence of terrorist activity in Vietnam today, which he now plans to publish.

It is a matter of some pain to us who are your friends that your enemies are better able to secure detailed information about what is happening in your country than we are! Last summer, you may recall, I presented you with a list of questions concerning security and asked you for answers to them so that I might prepare a serious, authoritative article on that subject which -- I felt -- might convince officials and scholars in the Free World that you continue to fight a war against the Communists even today, and that you deserve to be supported. Certainly, we know this to be true, but one must have detailed evidence to convince skeptics who now believe (a) that accounts of terrorist attacks in Vietnam are fabricated, or (b) that if they are true they indicate a weakening of your government's power, rather than an intensification of

Subversive activity by the Viet Cong. May I once more, speaking for myself personally, as well as for your other friends with whom I have discussed this matter: Col. Lansdale, Sen. Mansfield, Mr. Cherne, et al, request that you be kind enough to ask Mr. Hai to send me answers to the questions I asked, so that this question may be dealt with once and for all? Otherwise you must continue to expect articles such as that which appeared in the New York World Telegram (by Mr. Colegrove) the other day, and those which TIME magazine has published in recent weeks. You may also be interested to know that M. Fall is in contact with Joseph Alsop, with whose writings you are quite familiar.

4. Administrative reform and reorganization: it is well known that you embarked some years ago on a program of administrative reform and reorganization. Ordinance 57-A, for instance, has often been cited as a measure of importance; the elimination of the delegues as officials of real power is also mentioned as a helpful step; the training of large numbers of civil servants has been acclaimed. At the same time, I am reminded frequently that much confusion of authority is apparent as one looks at Vietnamese administration today. It is pointed out that when a terrorist attack occurs, there is often a fatal delay in responding to it while it is decided whether the garde civile, the dan ve, the surete, or the army has responsibility for meeting the challenge. It is even charged that in some cases two or even three of your security agencies will attempt to take charge simultaneously. The insinuation of a political element in this picture (the Can Lac Nhan Vi) is said to cloud the situation considerably. (Since I am here in the United States, and not in Vietnam, I cannot evaluate these charges accurately myself, but I can tell you that whether it is true or not, it is commonly believed in very responsible quarters.) There is also considerable criticism in the State Department, for instance, of the continuing failure of provincial chiefs, districtschiefs, and so on, to get close to the population; there is also much criticism of your seeming reliance on "repression" in trying to solve the problems of government in the field. (In particular, the reputedly "brutal" activities of the Vietnamese marines have been severely criticized.)

In addition to the four elements I have outlined for you above, I feel that I must speak to you frankly at this time about some other matters as well. (You have asked me to be honest with you at all times; I hope you will accept the remarks which follow, with this fact in mind.) You have known for a long time my evaluation of the loyalty you do or do not receive from your Ambassador in Washington. In July of 1954 you sent me a long letter commending M. Tran Van Chuong to me as one of your "loyal friends." I have tried to consider him in this light since that time. But it has become increasingly difficult for me to do so. I cannot refrain from saying that we in this country do not consider him among the "friends of Vietnam" living in the United States. His ambitions for higher office continue to plague him and his wife. And his unhappiness with the Agrarian Reform in Vietnam he has made known publicly on several occasions -- the most recent being a reception given by Mr. Buttinger for Gen. O'Daniel on the occasion of the publication of his story about Vietnam, written for American youth (see the review I have attached for an indication of how this book is being received). On this occasion he spoke -- eloquently as always -- to try to convince his audience (American publishers, businessmen, etc., and Vietnamese resident in New York City) that the Agrarian Reform in Vietnam was a terrible mistake; that landlords like himself have been badly treated, and so on. (If you wish, I believe I can secure a tape recording of his speech, made by the Voice of America for rebroadcast to the world. Please let me know if you want the recording.)

One member of Ambassador Chuong's staff, M. Nguyen Phu Duc, has succeeded in alienating the friendship and support for your government of some important Americans. Furthermore, your Ambassador has virtually succeeded in destroying the organization of your friends in America, of which, as you know, I am an active member. It is extremely difficult for us to understand why you continue to sanction this activity.

To move on now to other matters, I may mention that Mr. David Bane, who became convinced of the virtue of your cause while he was Assistant Political Officer in the American Embassy in Paris in 1954-55 (he was at odds with his boss, Mr. Gibson, whose attitude toward you will certain remember), is now Director of Northeast Asian Affairs in the Department of State. We see each other frequently, and he never fails to ask about your welfare, health, and progress. He has asked me to extend his warm wishes to you at this time.

I have received word that I have been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to do a detailed study of the Japanese Reparations Problem and its Settlement. This means that in August 1961 I shall proceed with my family to Japan, and thence to the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Burma, for a full year of research on this important problem. I hope that I may count on your cooperation in doing that part of the study that relates to Vietnam.

Finally, I wish to comment briefly on two matters of economic importance: the proposed insurance undertaking, and the proposed Pan-American/Intercontinental Hotel enterprise. Taking the Hotel question first, I would remind you that I have argued for Intercontinental's involvement a number of times. However, my support of their proposal was based in large measure on their professed willingness to put some of their own money into the hotel (\$250,000. U.S. was the sum they mentioned at the outset). Like others here, I have been dismayed by their progressive reduction of the amount of their money they are willing to involve, until now it is nil! I wish you to know that in the opinion of financial and government circles here you need not feel any further obligation to Pan-American, nor should you feel that they will not support a hotel if someone else builds it. There are several examples of hotels (e.g. the Erawan in Bangkok) which they have sent passengers to for several years. Surely they wish to build the hotel in Saigon because it would be profitable. But their attitude toward your problems and your needs has become cavalier and even indecent and objectionable in its callousness. You may feel quite sure that other potential investors can be found for the hotel. Mr. David Gordon, for example, is one whom I think could quite easily be persuaded to take over the proposal. As for the insurance undertaking, it is Mr. Gordon who, you may recall, went to the trouble of going to Saigon at his own expense to look into the possibility of entering the Societe Vietnamienne d'Assurances et de Re-assurances (V.A.R.). Unless there are sharp changes in that picture very soon, you may expect Mr. Gordon probably to withdraw from the arrangement, for the technical reason that he believes that the French and Swiss companies involved in the deal are "taking the Vietnamese for a ride." That is, to put it briefly and in non-technical language, Mr. Gordon has learned that the French and Swiss companies will make a far larger profit in this undertaking than they have admitted. Again, if you wish details, please let me know and I shall send them to you at once. In the meantime, perhaps M. Hanh could give you some information about this problem. (Obviously, it must not become known that I have given you this information.)

Finally, may I express my deep disappointment that M. Thuan was not authorized to extend and enlarge the Harold Oram contract while he was here? You will probably remember that I was very dubious about this firm when Mr. Cherne first proposed them to you in 1954. I wish to tell you very frankly that I have

SOME TO know them very well since that time. Furthermore, I have made careful inquiries about them (and other companies in the public relations business). As I wrote to Mr. Ladejinsky on this subject more than six months ago, I consider Mr. Oram, Mr. Jonas, and their associates to be among the most dedicated, honest, and capable experts in their field. You may know that they accept only contracts with which they are philosophically in sympathy. Furthermore, their fees are commonly regarded by their competitors as far lower than "necessary". Which is to say that they are indeed honest, and this is something which cannot be said about most of their competitors. Perhaps you have seen the enclosed holiday greeting they sent out in December. If not, it will interest you to note who are numbered among their clients. I may add that they also handled the Democratic Party campaigns in 1952 and 1956 (that is, the campaigns of Adlai Stevenson for President), even though this activity was without financial profit to them. Here again it is hard for us to understand why there has been so long a delay in authorizing them to go ahead as they have asked. M. Thuan and I discussed this while he was here, and I know that he understands -- or should understand -- the problems that exist in their relationship with Ambassador Chuong and M. Duc, to say nothing of Mme. Chuong. The latest episode of which I can inform you (since Mr. Oram will never say anything about it to you) is that your Ambassador has asked them (over the telephone, rather than in writing) to say nothing about either security or the agricultural situation in Vietnam, even though our newspapers are filled now with one article after another on these subjects, and it would seem very important for your government to have its views presented properly by your public relations counsel!

I fear that much of what I have written to you will seem bitter as you read it. If this is so, I hope you will understand that my candour in writing these things to you is motivated by the depth and sincerity of my friendship for you, and my profound belief in what you are trying to accomplish in Vietnam. I would not be a true friend if I masked my true thoughts and reactions behind soft and camouflaging language.

Warmest regards.

Faithfully yours,

Wesley R. Fishel
Professor of Political Science

WRF:jb