

1-44, Chofu-Minemachi
Ota-ku, Tokyo
Japan
October 12, 1961

Mr. Paul Kattenburg
American Embassy
Saigon, Vietnam

Dear Paul:

I hope this note finds you well and your blood pressure no higher than usual! (God but that's a cheery greeting, isn't it?) I have been intending to write you since we got to Japan nearly two months ago, but the pressures of getting the family settled and my studies underway have simply been too great to permit me the pleasure of normal correspondence. Now, however, I feel impelled to write, since I have had two very lengthy conversations with Bui Van Thinh (GVN Ambassador here and a long-time friend) which I think you should know about. Gilbert Kinney, at the AmEmbassy here has very kindly agreed to forward this to you via a safe channel, since this is not the sort of information to trust to the international mails.

As I write this, Thinh is in Saigon, having finally been allowed to come home after having asked permission to do so since last August. He has reached what may be a breaking point for him in terms of his relations with my great friend and his regime. He spoke most eloquently to me at lunch the day before he left here about his continuously growing dissatisfaction with Diem's government. He asserts that Diem understands now (and has for some time) that he (Thinh) was not involved in a plot to boost himself to power at the time he was booted from the cabinet and sent to Tokyo. He also says that his personal relations with NDD are excellent. However, politically, he says, he is "finished." That is to say, he wants out of this post, even though he is Vice-Dean of the corps here, and does not want even a cabinet post and intends to refuse if that should be offered.

Again, he spoke grimly and constantly of the "absolute necessity" of changing the regime, eliminating all of the incumbents (though keeping Diem as a figurehead if he were willing to be such — though Thinh admits this would be highly unlikely) and changing the government from the center on out. This would almost assuredly have to be accomplished by force, but I inferred that he is persuaded that the force is available. He is acutely depressed by the reported failure of the government to get out to the people and says bitterly that if it had done so before much of its difficulty

with the Viet Cong today could have been minimized. He spoke of the events in Vietnam today as "traumatic" in character. He seemed unclear on the details of how, when, and who would bring about "the next coup" but was emphatic that there would be one. He was contemptuous on the subject of the caliber of the present cabinet ministers, with a couple of exceptions, and he regards several as extremely dishonest, filling their pockets, etc. Mme. Nhu and husband — well, his thoughts are unprintable, and also the same for Can, about whom he told me several vivid anecdotes. One will suffice as illustration: when he went to Hue while still Minister of Interior, he called on Can to explain what his course of action would be in CVN. Can interrupted him to say: "Now, now, don't bother me with all those details about political parties, security, etc., etc. Just tell me what you want to achieve. I'll take care of the rest."

Interestingly enough, he has no use for the Veep either, saying: "I've known him a long time, and we are not friends." At the same time, he agreed with me that should there be a change in regime a considerable measure of stability would have to be assured lest the V-C take advantage of the situation. He further agreed that the institutional aspects of the regime: constitution, assembly, constitutionally prescribed lines of succession — ought to be kept (at least initially) for the sake of stability and order. "But there will inevitably be a period of chaos while we are in transition. However, this must be minimized." That is to say, he seemed to agree that the Veep would logically have to take over the reins of government if or when Diem stepped out. But this is not the ultimate solution, in his eyes. He insists that the generals will not follow Tho for ten minutes. He also disclaims any ambitions for the top post himself, though how genuine his disclaimers are I cannot at this point say. He did assert, however, that there are "many capable men" who could handle the post of President: "After all, you made Diem, you can make another. . . ." And again: "You must create a new leader for Vietnam from among the men who are available. Within a few months you will have to decide whether you wish to stick with the Diem solution or to try a new solution. But the Diem solution is passé. . . ." He claims that he is not anti-Diem (!), but has simply come to the painful conclusion that Diem has failed and that he will never change his attitude and his working habits (which you may recall has been brother Luyen's plaint to these many years). Ergo we must look elsewhere.

Perhaps all this has been reported by others, but since I have no contact with other Americans to speak of (here, that is), I thought it best to pass this along for whatever it may be worth.

Incidentally, did you notice that our good friend Choi Duk Shin is the new ROK Foreign Minister? Diem knows him well, and perhaps you had an opportunity to get to know him before he left Saigon.

My study of Japanese-Asian relations is slowly getting under way. I have been spending much of my time the past few weeks regenerating my command of Japanese, making scattered contacts, and generally getting my sensory apparatus in tune with the local transmitters. Jane joins me in sending our very best to Mary. Write when you can find time.

Cordially,

Elles