

November 19, 1960

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

Mr. President and very dear Friend:

The past week has been one of tension and drama for your many friends here. We were shocked and worried for your safety, and though we were optimistic for the outcome, the initial news reports indicated that the worst had occurred. I know that Mr. Jonas has kept you fully informed of the U. S. press reaction, directly and through your Embassy in Washington, but I am enclosing with this letter a set of clippings from the Midwest Edition of the Christian Science Monitor, which epitomize the general tenor of the stories in American newspapers. (You will undoubtedly recall that Dr. Dan wrote for the Monitor for several years.) The noteworthy exception to the general attitude of the press was the New York Times, where, after the initial stories were printed just as they were received in New York, Tillman Durdin, advised by Mr. Oram, Mr. Jonas, and myself, was able later to bring considerably more balance and objectivity into its stories and editorials. You may also be interested in the enclosed clipping from the New York Times of November 16 (which I am informed did not appear in New York or Washington in this precise form). It brings out an element in the situation which was much discussed here, though no evidence was brought out to support or to disprove it. Senator Mansfield, who phoned me several times from Washington to discuss the situation with me, suspected a French involvement, as did Mr. Durdin and President Hannah, of MSU.

Since more than one week ago I have been in almost continuous contact with others of your friends, including Chester Bowles, Senators Mansfield, Hart, McGee, Gen. Lansdale and O'Daniel, Mr. Cherne, and Mr. Buttinger. Obviously they manifested favorable attitudes. At the same time, there were overtones of caution which should suggest to you that their support rests on somewhat uneasy ground. They have been informed by U. S. officials that there is growing discontent in Vietnam as a result of overly zealous implementation of your programs of rural regroupment by local and provincial civil and military officials (e.g. with respect to the absence of payment to persons who worked on the agrovilles -- or as Bernard Fall has observed in a recent confidential memorandum: "agrogorods"). They have also been led to believe that there has been a distinct lessening of popular confidence in the ability of your government to extend adequate protection to the population outside the cities. In addition they have been told that there is disagreement within the ARVN officer corps on the wisdom and effectiveness of your government's anti-Communist military and political measures. And finally -- and most importantly, perhaps, from your personal standpoint -- there has been a steady increase in the number and the intensity of stories about your own asserted "authoritarian" characteristics, the purported influence of members of your family on policy decisions, and the alleged growth of corruption within the government.

You should know that, like others of your friends here, I have been bombarded with inquiries on the above subjects from influential officials, newspaper editors and journalists, TV commentators, and educators, as well as from countless ordinary citizens. I delivered four speeches on Vietnam during the past week alone! I found, much to my disgust, that there is an unhappy readiness on the part of cynical opinion leaders to believe that "we have been sold a bill of goods— this guy Ngo Dinh Diem is just like the others." (They are disappointed that Utopia has not yet been achieved.) This was indicated by the astonishing speed with which reporters leaped to the conclusion that the coup had succeeded — and that this success was ipso facto a good thing! Note for example the New York Times dispatch of November 11, from Washington, in which William Jorden reported that President-elect Kennedy had been informed by Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, that you were "under house arrest." The same article added the comment that the Department of State was, in effect, noncommittal about the revolt, which people took to mean that our government was no longer supporting you (contrary to the situation in late 1954, when both Donald Heath and Joe Collins told Gen. Hinh that the U. S. would not support a regime installed in Saigon by force). In this article also appeared the following interesting paragraph: "Developments in South Vietnam did not come as a complete surprise. Diplomats have been aware for a long time of the deep and growing discontent among the Vietnamese. They attributed it largely to President Ngo Dinh Diem's arbitrary rule, his heavy reliance on members of his own family for advice, and the failure of his government to meet popular hopes for rapid economic advancement." There was a final remark in this article: "The principal fear was that military units loyal to the President might go into action against the rebellious troops, and touch off a civil war." !!!

Although our dispatches were not altogether clear as to the role of Gen. Lionel McGarr in the negotiations, I was happy to see that he was involved — I hope for the good. Although I do not believe I mentioned it to you before, I had the pleasure of getting to know the General in Korea in 1953, when I was directing a special study there for the Secretary of the Army. He was at that time commanding the Prisoner of War Camps on Koje Island, near Pusan. You may remember that the Communist prisoners on Koje had revolted, captured the island commander, and ruled the POW enclosures for several weeks before order could be restored by the UN forces. Gen. McGarr was the man sent in to "clean up the mess," and he did his job brilliantly. I found him a tough, intelligent, thoughtful officer with an analytical mind and administrative ability. He has an excellent understanding of the strategy, tactics, and thinking of the Asian Communist soldier. It was with considerable pleasure that I learned he was going to Vietnam to replace Gen. Williams.

President Hannah, who has been a staunch defender of yours in official circles, has shared my concern during the past days. He is, as you may know, an unusually well informed man. Not only has he served as Undersecretary of Defense for President Eisenhower and as the Chairman of the President's Commission on Civil Rights, but he has been Vice President Nixon's principal advisor on Foreign Aid questions during the recent campaign. He is also consulted by the Democrats because he is regarded as able and objective, while yet a Republican. Even before the coup took place he had spoken to me of his (and his friends') concern with what had been reported to him as a "deteriorating situation" in Vietnam. He has asked me to go to Vietnam at once, if this can be arranged; and he told me yesterday, just before he left for Washington, that he had taken the unusual step of writing directly to you. If my visit should be possible, I would of course do anything in my power to be of help to you.

My warmest felicitations to you on your success. Once more you have emerged on top. It is unfortunate that the economic progress your government has promoted over the past year has been lost sight of in the excitement of political and military events. Perhaps it is now time to stress publicly the kind of economic revolution that has taken place in Vietnam over the last several months, especially in the realms of textile manufacturing, rice exporting, and so on. Certainly the outside world should be given some insight into the positive accomplishments of your regime, rather than the ugly negative aspects that have been brought out by the leaders of the coup, et al. Reality is often brutal and unkind, but if it can be read as a signal or a warning, it can be turned to one's advantage. I can assure you that your friends are with you, but as I have read their words and their thoughts they will be watching in the days ahead in the hope that your decisions with respect to programs and personnel indicate that you are being more accurately and fully informed than appears to have been the case in the past.

My wife and father join with me in wishing you the best of health and continued success in the months ahead.

Very sincerely,

Wesley R. Fishel
Professor of Political Science
Chairman, Asian Studies Group