

Strand Hotel
Rangoon, Burma
17 February 1962

Dr. John A. Hannah, President
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan
U. S. A.

Dear President Hannah:

I have recently left Saigon after spending four weeks there, and given the developments there during that time it occurred to me that you might be interested in my personal report on the situation which prevails there.

Since I left Saigon I have had no word from the MSU people there, and can only assume that the President has not reversed his decision to terminate the University's contract program in Vietnam. (If he has, of course, you will read the following remarks with a different perspective than otherwise.) As you can easily imagine, the interview at which the President informed me that he had decided against renewing the MSU contract was a difficult one. He was obviously ill at ease and made it plain that he hoped the program termination would not affect our personal relationship. At the same time it was clear that he held me at least partially responsible for the fact that MSU people had published what he called "untrue, unfair, and tendentious" criticisms of his government. He tried to depersonalize his decision by telling me that the members of his Cabinet had recommended against our continuation. But since I had already learned that he had consulted only two advisers: his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and the Secretary of State at the Presidency, Nguyen Dinh Thuan, I called him on this, whereupon he repeated earlier accusations that MSU personnel had been "disloyal." Both the President and his brother individually ~~repeated~~ implicit accusations in talking with me, to the effect that our professors had used their "privileged position", which gave them access to government offices, personnel, and files, to engage in intelligence activities in the guise of "research"; and had then used the information they had secured to the detriment of the Vietnamese Government.

I tried to reason with Diem on this, though I recognized from his manner that argument was probably futile. The voice was that of the President, but the reasoning was that of his brother, Nhu. I am sorry to say that Mr. Nhu apparently actually believes his own arguments and persuaded Diem of them. It is also a fact, however, that other members of the government, headed by the Vice President, while sharply critical of the publications in question, were fully convinced of the value of MSU's work and wanted very much for our group to continue its programs.

As much as I regret the termination at this time, when all of us should be making a maximum effort to keep the Vietnamese Government afloat, I am relieved that the issue was resolved enough in advance of the termination date to permit an orderly phasing out. And given also the situation which I shall outline in the following paragraphs, it is probably just as well that our work is being brought to a close, at least for the present time.

For the first time in seven and one-half years I have become a pessimist about the fate of South Vietnam. In the two and one-half years since my last visit to that country there has been a most profound and distressing deterioration there, politically, socially, and psychologically. Economically, though some progress is still being made, the gains of the past few years are in many cases being reversed, by a combination of factors of which the major ones have been very serious floods along the Mekong last fall, and sharply intensified Viet Cong activity. As you may know, Vietnam is not exporting rice this year; it will in fact import some. Again, there has been just enough interference in normal business and investment activity on the part of the government-supporting political party of Mr. Nhu to have a monkey-wrench kind of effect on economic operations. Militarily, the recent influx of thousands of American officers and men, and dozens of helicopters, etc., is starting to make a distinct change in the situation already, turning what was a minus into a plus. I would hesitate to predict, however, that the plus will remain that for long, for I find it hard to believe that the Chinese and Viet Cong will allow this challenge to go unmet. Indeed, my travels to the high plateau, the center, and the Mekong delta last month have left me with the impression that a Viet Cong offensive is very likely in the next few weeks. By that I don't mean a major invasion out of the north, but rather a heavily intensified terrorization program that may spread even to the cities, with the intent of panicking the population and weakening the Diem government's hold still more.

Politically and psychologically things are at a low ebb. The commendable programs which were begun a few years ago have been allowed in many instances to lose their momentum by reason largely of a failure on the part of the Central Government to follow through on initial decisions and acts. The hopes and aspirations of 1954 and 1955 have been allowed to die, and a miasma of apathy pervades the atmosphere. I talked more than casually with 118 people during my four weeks in Vietnam. Almost all are people I have known for many years. None of them is politically part of the "opposition." At least two thirds of them were still Diem's strong adherents in 1959. Yet today, only three or four of these men and women supports the government with discernible enthusiasm. Then too, there is much popular fear: fear that "the Viet Cong are coming," and that the government is not going to be able to move to meet the Communist threat swiftly enough to save many people from being hurt or killed. Of course, this is the kind of fear which is surreptitiously encouraged by Communist agents, of whom there are many in Saigon.

Diem himself is linked more and more often with those around him -- the "evil influences," as some call them. After all, he is the Chief of State and must take responsibility for the acts of his entourage, whether he knows of them or not: if he knows of them, he is at fault because they are "evil"; if he doesn't know of them, he should by now. No one yet accuses him of wrongdoing, and in fact he could recoup his former stature and support easily with just a minimum of effort. But he does not see the necessity or desirability of such steps, and no one who does has the courage to tell him. This applies even to those few still with him who are basically courageous, men of integrity and ability who despise the craven flatterers who surround him and insulate him from the realities of his situation. They are reluctant to tell him unpleasant truths because he may dismiss them, and they know that in that case "the evil ones" would put their own men into the vacancies and then even this tiny opening to the outside would be closed off.

Who are these "evil influences?" As always, Diem's brother, Nhu, heads the list, but shares his position with his wife. Nhu's policies have formed the philosophical basis of the regime's activity for the past six years, and they have failed miserably to win the people to the side of the government. But he doesn't realize this, and one cannot convince him (or Diem) of this. His wife is as brilliant, vivacious, bitchy, and brutal in her Borgia-like fashion as ever -- and with (charitably) the purest of intentions she is succeeding in alienating substantial segments of the population from her brother-in-law's regime at a time when it needs the enthusiastic support of everyone. She is the sponsor, for example, of an assinine bill that passed the National Assembly by a questionably secured majority: the "Social Purification Law." This silly legislation, rammed through the Assembly in the name of "austerity" and "mobilizing the population," prohibits dancing or the teaching of dancing, even in private homes, bans dissemination of birth control information, devices, or medications, and would regulate all sorts of other activities and practices including public displays of affection, certain kinds of dress, etc. Coming from a Catholic (and one of dubious morals, at that), it is interpreted to mean that Catholic dogma is being forced on the people, which means that it is creating inter-religious frictions where few have existed previously. Then there is the Secretary of State at the Presidency, Nguyen Dinh Thuan, a shifty, ambitious, clever, and unscrupulous -- but able -- administrator, who has his eye on even higher position, and some American friends who think him easier to handle than Diem. Much as I do not wish to see the influence of the Nhuses continue, the elevation of Thuan is not to me the answer either. For this man is as well hated as the Nhuses (who put him into his job, incidentally) and a likely candidate for assassination, either by the Communists or by many others who detest him as a man who has tasted power and likes it too well, and who climbed to his present position on the backs of those who were his friends and benefactors.

The US role in all this is, as ever, of mixed quality. The determined military effort we are now making is likely to help a good deal; our economic measures will also help. But these steps are helping only to warm the fingers and the toes; the body itself needs badly to be warmed too if it is to be kept alive. Unless Vietnam experiences a major and favorable psychological shock within the next few months, I doubt seriously

whether it will survive, notwithstanding our efforts and our money and our men. The bright spots which were so clearly visible two and even one year ago are now fading into insignificance because the regime still has failed to mobilize the hearts and loyalties of the people. This is ironical, for this is a regime which has based its system of appointment to office on "loyalty." And ironical too is the fact that this regime, which has a philosophical base (synthetic and unloved) of "personalism," which teaches that every man has the right to the fullest development of his personality, has failed miserably to enable men to do just that. (I am not speaking of civil liberties here -- they are still a side issue, by and large -- I speak of the freedom of men to rise in their chosen professions to positions of responsibility, to improve their status by their own efforts, by demonstrating their capacities and their talents.) I think here of all the young men I have known and worked with in Vietnam (including Nguyen Thai, who is once more back at MSU, and Vu Van Thai, who reportedly is now at Harvard), who have the qualities of leadership which Vietnam will need in the years ahead, but who have been alienated and their development stifled and smothered by the heavy hand of their government. (But I must clarify one point here: the Vietnamese Government is not malicious or predatory or vicious or particularly oppressive, especially if it is compared with the regimes of neighboring countries. Rather, it is a clumsy and bumbling government which has failed to take advantage of one opportunity after another, and which has not dared to take the risks involved in implementing its avowed ideas, and which has not carried successful programs to their successful conclusion.

Perhaps my rhetoric has left you with the impression that I have written my friend off. I have not. However, I am firmly of the opinion that unless what I have termed the "evil influences" are removed from the scene in one way or another, Ngo Dinh Diem's government is not going to make the grade. Support for the government is dwindling, and one finds evidences of angrowing feeling of desperation among the able and hitherto loyal men and women who have supported it. Unless the situation can be changed for the better, we are in for a very bad period in Vietnam.

Sincerely yours,

Wesley R. Fishel