

2118 Chamberlain Avenue
Madison, Wisconsin
December 7, 1965

Mr. Robert A. Mang, Secretary
Bay Area Inter-Universities Committee
on Foreign Policy
2160 Lake Street
San Francisco, California 94121

Dear Mr. Mang:

Your letter of November 24 seeking opinions on the letter by Professor Wesley R. Fishel and other writers to the Boston Record American, October 21, 1965, was referred to me. I am not a specialist on Vietnam, and have never been in Southeast Asia. I have, however, been a close student of international Communist politics for twenty years. Moreover, I have read many of the works of the signers of the letter just referred to. As far as I can tell, every point that they make is an accurate and sound assessment of the situation in Vietnam and the relation of this situation to the general context of international relations.

It is perhaps a reflection of the modesty and objectivity of the signers of this letter that they limit their observations almost entirely to their special geographic area of competence. More presumptuously, I shall add a few more arguments of a broader nature which I think strengthen the general position the signers reflect:

(1) A decade ago many of us were very uneasy about basing American foreign policy upon "massive retaliation". Instead, it seemed to us that the United States must face the arduous task of fighting, when it was unavoidable, limited wars which did not seek the complete overthrow of the aggressor regime. Without advocating any particular tactic in Vietnam, or even necessarily approving all that have been employed by the United States there, I must say that the Vietnamese situation seems very closely to fit the kind of limited action which we envisaged as the alternative to massive retaliation or all-out war. In such a situation the executive branch is entitled to a very broad benefit of the doubt in employing specific means.

(2) Because of the danger of all-out war the United States has in practice renounced intervention in the established spheres of control of the major Communist states, even where the latter, as in Hungary and Tibet, have been engaged in manifestly brutal and oppressive tactics. I hope that the United States will never employ similarly oppressive tactics, but the corollary of our abstention must be the abstention by the USSR and Communist China from employing forceful means outside of their own spheres of control. I believe that the Soviet regime understands this implication at present, but any relaxation of our policy of containing Soviet force would throw in doubt the whole balance which has ensured a considerable measure of world stability during the past fifteen years.

(3) The argument over the kind and degree of assistance to be given "wars of national liberation" is an old one in the Communist regimes. The phrase itself is simply a cover term for efforts of Communist or Communist-dominated organizations to seize control. Within the Soviet as well as the Chinese Communist parties there have always been significant factions which have advocated extending large amounts of material aid, particularly in the form of weapons, to the "national liberation" forces, and encouraging them in all-out efforts to seize power in spite

of the misery which such tactics inflict on the peoples of the countries involved, and the risks to world peace which are involved. For over eight years this argument has been a crucial--I believe the most crucial--element in the dispute between the Moscow and Peking Communist leaders. The Moscow regime under Khrushchev and his successors has regarded the chances of success of "national liberation" wars as low and the risks involved as high. If, however, through our dereliction the "national liberation" war in Vietnam should be successful, this calculation would appear false, and the Peking regime's advocacy of general support of "national liberation" wars valid. Since the Soviet calculation has always been a narrow and tentative one, and is undoubtedly opposed (tacitly or openly) by important elements of the Soviet leadership, an apparent demonstration of the validity of the Peking thesis would tend to drive the Soviet regime and the whole World Communist movement into a position of belligerent aggressiveness involving incalculable risks for world peace. Conversely, a demonstration that "national liberation" war could not overthrow a non-Communist government in Vietnam would add weighty support to the Soviet position, and thereby tend to reduce very considerably the danger of future forceful subversion. The temporary coolness in Soviet-American relations which our posture in Vietnam may entail is a very small price to pay for the long-run security which Communist abandonment of "national liberation" tactics would provide.

(4) In the present world situation time is an essential factor. A firm position in South Vietnam during the next several years may permit the development of much more stability in the non-Communist world, particularly in Southeast Asia. Recent developments in Indonesia appear to point in that direction. Conversely, the controversy between Peking and Moscow, which is on the whole exacerbated by the Vietnamese situation, may grow more acute. Consequently, in addition to preserving some measure of choice for the South Vietnamese people, the present resistance to Communist aggression there may contribute to a larger development of stability which will permit many peoples to exercise a measure of influence over their own destinies.

You may quote my remarks publicly if you wish, but of course only in a context which will reflect my meaning, which, I believe, must entail quoting complete sentences only. It has been my practice in responding to an inquiry such as yours to send a copy of my remarks to those whose observations are at issue. Consequently, I am sending a carbon copy of this letter to Professor Fishel.

Very sincerely,

John A. Armstrong

Congratulations on your forthright stand. If I can help in any way let me know.

JAA