

Saigon
March 2, 1962
(No. 25 to Jane)

Dear Jane, kids, and Dad -

Here I am again in Saigon. Call it Fishel's Fool Luck -- because anyway you look at it, I missed the excitement very neatly. I was in Rangoon when the planes bombed the palace here, and had just arrived here when General Ne Win took over there. Hump! Wouldn't you know it? Just think of being out here so close, and yet being between these two interesting events. Well, in any case, I was just given a tape recording of the raid on the palace which was made by the high school-age son of an MSU chap, and I'll let you have that vicarious experience in Tokyo. (I believe my tape also has some of the sounds of the coup of 1960 on it.) The boy who made it is Everett and Lorraine Emery's son, whom Jane will remember from Lansing. They've weathered the excitement very calmly and with much maturity, whereas some other people, including MAAG officers' families, whom you'd think would be most prepared for shooting, went haywire, became hysterical, and so on. For that matter, so did one of the MSU couples, and tonight they spent half an hour explaining and, in effect, apologizing and rationalizing their behavior, of which they evidently were later quite ashamed. Eleamore Fox also distinguished herself by her calmness, and she went around her neighborhood calling on other Americans to reassure them and offer them any help they/might need (they didn't need anything but nerve) although she herself has again been quite ill with a very painful skin allergy and a bursitis in her shoulder for which she will now have to receive cortisone shots.

Although the newspapers here and elsewhere referred to the bombing of the Independence Palace (which is thoroughly gutted and will have to be rebuilt) as an act committed by two young pilots for personal revenge reasons, it was not only that but much more as well. These young men's families are members of the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Dan is pronounced as if it were Zan, but the last word is a "D"), a North Vietnamese political party which lost its strength at the time of partition in 1954, but which has been quietly reorganizing here in the south and preparing to try to seize power. I think it will become clear in the weeks ahead, as the investigation proceeds, that the bombing was intended to eliminate Diem, Nhu, and Mme. Nhu, and had it succeeded, certain Army units would have been led by their commanders to seize key points in the city and elsewhere. Whereupon the politicians in the VNQDD would have taken power. This group, however, is not overly savory, has no clear-cut ideology or program, and certainly is not "democratic." It is simply anti-Diem and pro-VNQDD. Now, of course, the Government will take steps to try to eliminate its officers from their posts in the Army and its civilians who happen to be in the bureaucracy from their positions as well. Had the VNQDD plot succeeded, you may be sure they would ruthlessly have liquidated Diem's supporters wherever they found them, so spare no sympathy for them now that they have failed. For this is the course of revolution. If you succeed, you've got it made; if you fail

Everyone here talks of Diem's incredible stoicism and courage. Just two hours after the bombing he received the diplomatic corps (who came both to wish him well and to see how much damage had been done) with not even the slightest evidence of having just experienced a major attempt on his life; he joked with them, was relaxed and natural -- exactly as I remember him in 1957 when a would-be assassin fired his machine pistol at him in our presence at Banmethuot, gravely

wounding the Minister of Agrarian Reform. Diem was hardly fazed, beyond showing concern for his wounded friend. He is a fatalist, believes he enjoys God's protection (he had, you may recall, what has been explained as "extra-sensory intimation" of the Banmethuot event, which I know of from personal experience at the time -- rather shattering kind of fore-knowledge), and indeed, his escape this time was, according to the military experts, a fraction-of-a-second kind of thing. Likewise his brother and sister-in-law. Had the pilots released their bombs merely a fraction of a second (one air force officer said 1/100th of a second) earlier, Diem would surely have been killed. Had they pushed the buttons a fraction of a second later, the Nhus would have had it. As it was, they all escaped, though the bombs fell between them! Mme. Nhu then ran into the next room to rescue her children, found the baby's nurse dying from the bombs (but the baby unhurt), failed in the smoke and flames to see a great hole in the floor where the bombs had gone through, and fell two stories to the palace basement! She suffered only scratches and bruises! But I'm afraid her bitterness once more exceeded her judgment, for the Government today issued a communique concerning her injuries that seemed to me in markedly poor taste, spiteful, bitter, and not the kind of thing that will make her any more friends or sympathizers.

As for Rangoon: want that one now too? Okay. Even though you write me not, I shall be a good son and father and husband, noble and long-suffering, and keep you informed. (Actually, I've had no mail from my Tokyo family for two weeks, roughly, and one letter from Pappy in that time -- from Tucson. I assume your letters meet the fate some of mine seem to have met, and that you are alright.) What follows here is the text of a memo I wrote to East Lansing from Rangoon just before leaving there, minus the remarks that do not pertain to Burma.

The streets are once more falling into disrepair and looking dirty again. By day the garbage collectors supplied by nature — millions of big black crows — cluster in the trees overhead, swoop down and pick up choice pieces of food, even from under the noses of people (and especially children) eating it, and they "caw" raucously. Around dusk you see the human scavengers prowling around in the gutters and garbage heaps; and when dark comes there are the rats: millions of big black rats, poking through the garbage and rubbish, hauling off the best items, and leaving the remainder for possible city collection on the morrow.

Last night I was interested to see a military policeman, "armed" with a baton, walking along the street, telling shopkeepers to pick up their garbage and rubbish and put them into cans. I am told that the Army also sends men out near dawn to hit rats with sticks. But the rats I saw look very well fed, and given their condition of life, they should be. Buddhist "live and let live" attitudes, reluctance to kill/any living thing (but not chicken, interestingly enough), plus governmental lethargy, make a reduction in the local rodent and crow populations something less than imminent.

The Burmese are a happy people, completely relaxed, full of jokes and tricks, earthy in their approach to life, and, as good practicing Buddhists, generous and forgiving. Of course there are exceptions: the Army, for example, which took over the reins of rule once and might do it again (though the civilian politicians are hopeful they can keep the officers disunited and therefore unable to bring off a coup) is fairly efficient, well heeled, and ambitious for Burma's future, and perhaps the town. It operates state corporations, agricultural enterprises, and training institutes, as well as doing the things an army normally does. There is an insurgency problem, with some 9000 of them scattered around the countryside, but most of their activity is a kind of banditry and dacoitry today. Some are Communists (and there has been some infiltration of the Army, I am informed), but they do not now pose the kind of problem we see in Vietnam. The Communists who worry people here most are Burma's great northern neighbors, the Chinese.

U Nu seems to have few illusions about the Chinese menace, but he reasons that he can gain nothing by quarreling with them at this point; whereas he can gain from a policy of coexistence. It would appear that he is right, thus far. China is beginning to build "gift" institutes, buildings, and other things for the Burmese, eager to show in this neutralist country how peace-loving she is where her immediate small neighbors are concerned. But U Nu has expressed himself privately with some skepticism concerning Chinese intentions. And other Burmese are far less reticent than the Prime Minister to speak out on the subject. U Law Yone, the well known editor of The Nation, Burma's best known English language paper (he also edits a Burmese paper as well) told me that he expects Burma to be Communist-ruled "within six years." As U Nu's close friend and confidante, one wonders how far he reflects his friend's thinking. On the other hand, more responsible people among those with whom I have spoken are worried about the deterioration of the Burmese government and its increasing inefficiency. Another editor, for instance, U Sein Win, who publishes The Guardian, an English language newspaper which often reflects the Army's views, told me flatly, apropos this subject, that "this Government will not last until the 1964 elections; the Army won't stand for what it's doing." (looking back now, it's obvious that he knew what was going to take place, but I didn't sense the imminence of the move he spoke of.)

You are probably aware of the fact that the Burmese are very critical of the U. S. Not because we are anti-Communist, however (apart from U Nu, whose idea of neutralism is to stay aloof from all; whereas Nehru's neutralism is to have active relations with all); but because we "have done so little for Burma!" For instance, in my reparations research I have heard from several Burmese in high positions how Burma would have got far more money from the Japanese than she did had she only been favored with the "moral support" of the U. S., as the Philippines were. It doesn't seem to occur to them that we had a special kind of relationship with the Philippines, and that Burma, after all, was a British colony!

Then it turns out that their real target is John Foster Dulles, because he urged the Asian countries to treat Japan gently back in 1949-50, and "what could a small country like Burma, with no aces in her hand," do against not only Japanese reluctance but American collaboration with everyone's old enemy? They are also critical of the U. S. aid program in Burma, pointing out that every Burmese knows about the "Russian gift hotel" and the "Russian gift college," but the Americans came to Burma long before the Russians, and what can we point to? I should add that their criticisms, though tinged with some bitterness, are not unfriendly, and for all their official "neutralism", most Burmese are anti-Communist and, especially, anti-Chinese Communist. In fact, there are two things the U. S. has done which have angered them a good deal. Working through covert agencies, we at one point assisted the Kuomintang troop units who had fled into Burma from Southwest China at the time of the Communist takeover in China. We assisted them to harass the Chinese Communists while they were in "privileged sanctuary" on Burmese soil; we did it clandestinely, and though we were found out, we denied our involvement. This they resented bitterly. The second, and more surprising episode was our speaking loud and walking backwards in Laos. This depressed the Burmese far more than I had ever expected. They were upset first of all by the kind of men we had chosen to back. And then they were made doubly unhappy by the fact that after we had blustered and blown our trumpets loudly, we quietly folded our tents and made ready to pull out. So on two counts they felt their judgment of our "unwisdom" was borne out.

The Burmese Army is not a politically interested organization as such, but it is led by spirited nationalists who have a more systematic and orderly outlook than U Nu and his cabinet. The Army is critical of the administration's inefficiency and growing corruption (though in my opinion it is not as corrupt as most other governments in Asia that I know), and impatient of its dalliance with the Chinese Communists. At the same time, Gen. Ne Win reputedly is more interested in his golf than in politics (though I wonder to what extent this is camouflage). His deputy, Brig. Aung Gyi, is highly ambitious politically and also considered pro-Chinese (though not pro-Communist); he is more than half Chinese by ancestry, and is not too well liked by other Burmans, though he is much respected for his ability and brains. It isn't clear yet where the Army lines up on the issues of Federalism and Nationalization of Import Industries, the two issues currently agitating the political world here. But judging from remarks made to me by some Army officers and their political (civilian) friends, they are against both moves, seeing in them, first, disunifying elements (that is, a breaking down of such union as the Union of Burma has been able to achieve, given the many component groups that compose it), and second, elements making for the stagnation of commerce by driving private merchants out of import-export occupations.

(end of earlier memo)

My two weeks in Burma were very worthwhile. I came into contact with a cross-section of the articulate Burmese. But for all that the Burmese I met were delightful people and I could enjoy working with them, I think I'd find working in Burma crushingly frustrating. Perhaps under the new "caretaker regime" (the name applied to the first Army government, in 1958-60) things will be different. We shall see.

Oh yes, odd notes that occur to me: Burma being neutral, one sees on the streets all sorts of Chinese and other imports. Many are bald imitations of American products, for example: alongside boxes of Colgate toothpaste being sold by street vendors one sees identically colored and labeled toothpaste boxes called "Coldent," "Caldent," and "College." Very amusing: they come, respectively, from Rangoon, Communist China, and Hongkong. Another miscellaneous item: I walked past the entrance to a building and was startled to see two men carrying out a third one who was quite obviously unconscious. The building was

the office of "Dr. Kyee Paw -- MBBS, FRCS, FRFPG, FACS, FICS, FCCP." What an advertisement!

Now it's clear that I'll have to spend a few more days in Burma next summer while we're en route to Europe. What with a change in government, new policies, a new reparations agreement with the Japanese, I have no choice. And unfortunately they tell me the new hotel there won't be completed by then. Ugh, stranded at the Strand once more. . . .

I guess that about does it for this time. I hope you are all well and not too cold or unhappy. I miss you all. Can I count on you're joining us in April for cherry blossom viewing in Japan, pappy? It would be nice. The little Foxes send their best to all of you. Eleanore says she had a letter from Jane. I regret to say she isn't well (her illness I find I mentioned at the start of this volume), and Guy's mother is gravely ill in Texas. Vo Van Hai and the Vice President also send their regards to you. Do write some time.

Love to all of my children, their mother, and their grandfather.