

November 12, 1960

To: Senator Mike Mansfield

From: Wesley R. Fishel

Subject: Attempted coup-d' etat in Saigon.

A. Background:

The reasons for the coup of November 11 may reasonably be presumed to include the following:

1. sharply increased Communist activity within the Republic of Vietnam and along its frontiers, with a concomitant increase in feeling of insecurity and a lessening of confidence in the ability of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime to extend adequate protection to the population outside the cities;
2. growing discontent among the rural population in the southern and southwestern provinces as a result of overly zealous implementation by local and provincial civil and military officials of President Ngo's programs of rural population regroupment;
3. disagreement within the ARVN officer corps on the wisdom and effectiveness of the Government's anti-Communist military measures;
4. plotting by oppositionist (but non-Communist) elements among the Saigon intellectuals desirous of seizing political power;
5. corollary hostility toward the reputedly excessive political power of members of the Ngo Dinh family and belief that this hostility could be effectively exploited in a revolt against Ngo Dinh Diem's government.

B. Factors of Significance

1. President Ngo apparently still enjoys the support of the armed forces;
2. the Department of State was carefully noncommittal on where the U.S. stood during this revolt. There was no statement such as was issued by Ambassador Heath and General Collins in 1954, to the effect that the United States would not aid a regime established by force in Saigon;
3. the Communists were given an excellent opportunity to take advantage of turmoil in the south and the consequent involvement of at least two infantry divisions and a paratroop brigade in the Saigon fighting;

4. this revolt should serve as a signal to President Ngo that there is serious unrest in the country; one hopes that he will react by making reforms in his administration, rather than accepting advice which he is certain to be offered by certain of his aides, to the effect that the solution to the problem is increased repression. A cabinet shift a few weeks ago removed from the regime two ministers who were associated popularly with objectionable government programs (Tran Chanh Thanh - Information; Lam Le Trinh - Interior), and replaced them with less objectionable people (Tran Van Dinh, a young man who has been Consul General in Rangoon, became Director General of Information and Press — the Ministry as such was eliminated; Bui Van Luong, Commissioner General of Refugee Resettlement and more recently of Land Resettlement, became Minister of the Interior). The realignment, however, was generally viewed as a change in personnel rather than as a major reorganization. I do not think a major reorganization is indicated necessarily, however; what is needed is a change of approach by the President.

5. American contacts with Ngo Dinh Nhu have been weak and sporadic. Mme. Nhu was sharp in her criticism of U.S. officials during her visit to Washington this fall (in private conversations within the Vietnamese Embassy and not to Americans) because they assertedly ignore M. Nhu in their dealings with the Government, preferring to take matters directly to the President. "The French," she said, "know how to act. They know enough to discuss certain types of matters with the Political Counselor first."

Elaboration of A. above:

1. As you are aware, after the signing of the Geneva agreements the Viet Cong withdrew their uniformed forces, and ostensibly, their political and clandestine personnel north of the 17th parallel. In point of fact, however, as many as 10,000 cadres remained in the non-Communist zone south of the parallel, to prepare for the expected day when the peninsula would be reunified under Communist control. The unanticipated ability of the post-Geneva government of Ngo Dinh Diem to remain in power even in the face of the host of critical political, social, economic, and administrative problems confronting it is generally accepted to have caused a major shift in Viet Cong programs vis-a-vis the free half of Vietnam. Without bothering here with the details of recrudescence Communist subversive activity with which I presume you are already familiar, I should note simply that violence has increased sharply both in quantity and in severity and scope of individual occurrences. Whereas in 1957 occasional hit-and-run attacks on single vehicles, isolated peasant cottages, or rubber plantations took perhaps 400 lives during the course of the year, large-scale guerilla warfare is now going on in several provinces of the south and southwest simultaneously. Casualties are estimated at from 200 (conservative) to 700 (probably extreme) per month. (I would accept a figure of about 400 as reasonable, with half of that number being killed.) Because of the extremely difficult character of much of the terrain involved (swamp, jungle, mountains) and the still inadequate means of communication (i.e. roads, airfields, canals) to the interior from the cities, the guerillas can attack more or less at will, choosing their targets from among the currently unprotected

villages, etc. The Government forces, on the other hand, are attempting to seek out and destroy infiltrating units of Communists, while at the same time extending protection to as many isolated villages and households as is physically feasible. The most recent incident of note occurred on October 21, when four or five battalions of non-uniformed Viet Cong troops based in North Vietnam crossed Laotian terrain and struck at Vietnamese Army (ARVN) posts near Kontum. (According to the New York Times, November 9, 1960, identification of the attackers came from captured documents and the testimony of prisoners. Significantly, two of four prisoners said to be in Saigon were tribesmen from the Kontum region who said they had been trained near Hanoi.)

2. To meet the Communist challenge, President Ngo has committed his Government to a multifold program of military, political, and social measures. Troops have been given added training in guerilla and jungle warfare with a view to making them increasingly effective against Viet Cong units. Paratroops have been active, and helicopters have been secured from the U.S. Generals O'Daniel, Williams, and Myers are agreed that the ARVN is today a strong and effective force. (Interestingly, the paratroops reportedly involved in the attempted takeover have been considered among the units most strongly loyal to Ngo Dinh Diem.) The military have also been charged with the execution of some of the regime's political and social programs, including major roles in the construction of agrovilles — towns in the countryside — and with the governance of provinces which have particularly serious security problems.

3. To date, some 17 agrovilles have been built south and west of Saigon. Each is located astride a known corridor of Communist infiltration or in the center of an area of subversive activity. Agrovillage populations range from a minimum of about 1,000 to a maximum of approximately 10,000; each is planned to service an immediately surrounding population of about 25,000 peasants. The population of each town is composed of peasants from the immediate area, who, it has been charged, are regrouped involuntarily by the Government. (The Government denies this, and while admitting some coercion was necessary, given the traditional attachment of the peasant to his home and land, asserts that the initial agrovilles have been so successful that numerous outsiders have petitioned the Saigon administration for permission to move in.)

The reasons for the regroupment are, first, increased ease of protection; second, improved economic and social welfare. As for security, it is considered easier to protect several thousand persons in a town than the same number living in individual and often extremely isolated farmhouses. From the standpoint of social and economic welfare, each agrovillage contains a hospital or dispensary, lying-in clinic, school, and central market. Each is also electrified (diesel generators), a step which has economic and psychological consequences of great importance. Unfortunately, there has been a reported gap of some dimensions between the President's order to establish these population clusters and the programs of implementation. For instance, the Presidency has set norms of performance for the length of time required for the construction of each agrovillage, but overly zealous functionaries and military officers charged with carrying out the order in the field have tried to beat the norms in order to make a name for themselves. Again, the peasants who were mustered to work on these projects supposedly were to be paid for their labor. In fact they have not been paid. Conflicting accounts make it difficult to assess the blame for this situation, which seems to have aroused considerable discontent in the countryside.

4. When Ngo Dinh Diem came to power in 1954, his cabinet was made up of presumably loyal nationalists. As time passed, some disagreed with his ideas and his programs. One, Dr. Pham Huu Chuong, Minister of Public Health in the first Ngo cabinet, deserted to the Cao Dai. Others were men of little courage and quit the government rather than face the prospect of war against the Sects in 1955. Still other nationalists were never taken into the Government, either because they were considered too ambitious, or as hostile to the Ngo Dinh family, or because they set too high a price for their cooperation. Dr. Phan Quang Dan, who came forward as a leader in the recent coup, fell into all three categories. Notwithstanding, he was offered a post in Ngo Dinh Diem's government (he was given a choice of the portfolios of Labor and Youth, Information, Public Health), but he insisted that he must have either Interior or Defense -- i.e. police or the armed forces -- if he were to join. This demand was refused, and he became a leader in the opposition.

I have remarked to you on numerous occasions the evident failure of the Ngo Dinh Diem government to enlist the support of the intellectuals of Vietnam. This however must be qualified by pointing out that the regime itself is composed of intellectuals, as that term is defined there. No effort, however, has been made by the President or his advisors to secure the active cooperation of intellectuals other than those directly involved in the business of government. At the same time, one must seriously question whether the Vietnamese intellectuals could be brought into a position of support for any regime, given the conditions that maintain in Vietnam today and the consequent necessity for the Government to counter insecurity by strong measures and with a firm controlling hand. It is a fact that the Vietnamese intellectuals have been consistently factionalist in their attitudes and activities; a multiplicity of tiny political groups still exists, linked only by a dislike for the present regime and a general desire to take over in its place.

It should also be noted that the President is not the easiest man in the world to work with. He is strong willed and determined, and convinced of the righteousness of his cause; he has a sharp tongue and temper that awes or frightens cabinet ministers and other subordinates and is undoubtedly a factor in their unwillingness to tell him unpleasant truths, even when they should be told to him. Even the Vice President, a man of great force and capacities, refrains from discussing certain topics (e.g. "the family") with the President.

5. You are certainly familiar with the reputed commercial activities of Mme. Nhu and her associates. True, M. Nhu is usually linked with his wife in such accusations, but there is no evidence that he is involved in schemes for personal gain. For that matter, no proof has even been offered (even by dismissed, disgruntled, and alienated cabinet ministers such as Nguyen Huu Chau, now in Paris) of Mme. Nhu's wrongdoing, though charges abound. Every effort with which I am familiar to "check out" these charges has had a negative finding. What is documentable, however, is the fact that in the name of the Can Lao Nhan Vi (the clandestine political party headed by M. Nhu, and purposed toward fighting the Viet Cong in their own fashion) a number of questionable business deals have been concluded in the past three or four years. The apparent reason for these involvements is the necessity of finding financing for the Can Lao party, given the consistent refusal of the President to approve the diversion of governmental funds for this purpose. In any case, there is a ready market for rumors concerning the asserted profiteering of the Nhus and their friends. The sources of these rumors appear in certain cases to be French; in other instances they have been quite clearly Vietnamese. Since corruption has been an obvious feature of Vietnamese administrations for a

great many years, one tends to accept the rumors as have some basis in fact until proved otherwise! However, from my own experience in Asia I would hazard an educated guess that the Ngo administration is considerably less corrupt than most Asian governments today; or to put it another way, it is relatively honest. It is interesting also that no one accuses Ngo Dinh Diem himself of being in any way involved in anything shady or devious.

C. The coup:

Sometime in 1956, a group of oppositionist politicians, including ex-Bao Dai cabinet ministers, ex-Ngo Dinh Diem ministers, former Cao Dai and Hoa Hao personalities, and even a few Catholic politicians began meeting informally to discuss how they might bring a legitimate opposition political party into being. Most of the participants -- Dr. Phan Huy Quat, for example -- were interested in developing a responsible to the Government. A few, such as Dr. Dan, Tran Van Van, and Phan Khac Suu, seem to have been motivated basically by a desire for power, and were not restrained by the scruples of men like Quat or Nguyen Tang Nguyen. These opportunists had friends among the officer corps of the Army, and set about building a revolutionary striking force. (It is worth noting also that most of the individuals involved in the coup were considered pro-French or as having French orientations.)

On April 30, 1960, a group of 18 oppositionists (not including Dr. Dan, though one of the group states that Dan had been invited to join) sent a petition to President Ngo, asking for certain "reforms." With evident eyes on the uprising that had just occurred in Korea, the petition was released to foreign journalists in Saigon before the President had an opportunity to reply to it. Obviously, this did nothing to enhance its chances of being received approvingly by President Ngo. In addition, it should be noted that the petition was, judging from its wording, drawn up more with a view to its popular effect than with a view to impressing the President with its wisdom and justice.

On August 1, another petition was submitted by some of the same group, urging the Government to stop work on the agrovilles because they assertedly were disliked by the affected population and because the coercive measures employed by officials in the field were alienating peasants and driving them into the arms of the Communists. Although the Government rejected these charges, the agrovile program was in fact halted temporarily without explanation a few weeks later. It has since been set in motion again, however, and 17 of the rural towns have now been dedicated by the President. Radio Hanoi, moreover, has indicated quite clearly on several occasions that the agrovilles do in fact constitute a serious obstacle to their plans for infiltrating and subverting the regime in the south.

We do not have full details of the coup as yet, though Tillman Durdin's article and the editorial in tomorrow's New York Times (November 13) are adequate and reliable summaries of the situation. It is noteworthy that President Ngo is reported to have granted amnesty to the minor participants in the revolt, and is holding for trial and probable punishment only the ringleaders.