

May 6, 1964

Mr. Henderson Stockton
326 Palm Lane Street
Phoenix, Arizona

Dear Mr. Stockton,

My friend Ton That Trach was kind enough to pass on your letter and asked me to write and give you my view of the situation in South Vietnam. I was all the happier to comply with his request as for more than five years I have continuously sought within my modest means to retrieve the situation.

We are moved by the interest that you are taking in our country and encouraged by sympathies such as yours and that of so many other American friends.

I have, nevertheless, delayed in writing to you because I preferred to wait for events to clarify themselves.

Three months have elapsed since General Nguyen Khanh's coup d'etat. The government he formed has been in action for over two and a half months. The U.S. Defense Secretary McNamara and General Taylor have come for an on-the-spot inspection of the situation. More recently, at the Forrester dinner on March 26, 1964, Mr. McNamara made an important policy statement on the situation in South Vietnam, the Communist strategy, the American position and the hopes that the United States places on the Khanh's government.

Mr. McNamara's speech produced a good impression in Vietnamese political circles, by the clear definition of the U.S. resolution to reject all generous compromises and to help our country to fight until our final victory.

The situation of the country, however, is very complex because things are far from being what we expect. As a matter of fact, viewpoints differ widely, depending on whether the situation is considered from within or from without, since the criteria for appraisal are not the same.

Time is running short, not because the Communists are overwhelmingly strong, but because our army, our administration and our population are showing more and more dangerous signs of weariness. Indeed, one is weary of 19 years of war, a war in which one does not know what is at

stake, a war which one is not sure to win and a war from which one does not know how to escape. One is also weary of so much frequent turmoil, lying and frustrations.

To stem the tide under these conditions is extremely difficult, but not impossible, provided one is honest with oneself and determined to put an end to mistakes once and for all.

To accept as natural the successes scored so far by Communists would be to recognize Communist invincibility. Then what would be the sense in fighting at all? But if their successes are the result of our shortcomings and omissions, then why not make an introspective analysis of ourselves, put everything under the spotlight of strict examination and boldly correct ourselves by getting rid of customary ways of thinking and acting?

The source of these shortcomings and omissions, in my opinion, comes from the following:

- We do not have a sufficiently high conception of life and man, and a proper notion of the power of ideas and psychological values, which are rousing and leading the world today more than ever.
- We do not have a strategy to measure up to that conception and that notion; and, consequently, we do not have a tactic to measure up to that strategy.
- Our actions more often than not contradict our most solemn declaration of intentions, so that the means are not coordinated with the end.

What an empty freedom, in fact, we are proposing to people who are suffering from hunger, cold and oppression, when as Karl Marx said, freedom means only freedom for the rich to crush the poor, the literate to crush the illiterate and the strong to crush the weak.

And what cause of freedom are we defending when we believe only in the might of arms?

What welfare and what progress are we offering to people when our policy consists at most in bringing temporary relief like acts of charity rather than a just and equitable solution to the problems of life?

These are some of the points I would like to discuss with you

today, in the hope that your sincere sympathy for our cause and President Johnson's friendship for you will help find a solution for the problem of Vietnam which is also the problem of the United States.

A RETROSPECTIVE GLANCE AT THE SITUATION PRIOR TO THE II-1-63 COUP D'ETAT

If, as Secretary of Defense McNamara has said, "for South Vietnam the horizon was bright," up until the end of 1959, in my opinion, the danger began to threaten the South as early as March 27, 1958. This was the day when Ngo Dinh Diem, despite the intense renewal of Communist subversive activities, adopted the view of his brother, and political advisor, to avoid actual combat with Communism and to withdraw the guard-posts in order to preserve his forces to be ready for a third World War he thought inevitable and imminent.

On its side, Hanoi had launched in January, 1957 its Plan of Revolution in the South and issued instructions to its cadres to carry out this plan "to rid the South of American Imperialists and Diem's puppet government".

It was this policy of defeatism joined to other mistakes of Saigon which pitched the population against the regime and provided the Communists with the ideal opportunity for upheaval.

If outward appearances could still deceive, the fruit, nevertheless, was quite ripe and ready to fall.

Through Colonel Floyd Parker (now living at Hotel Prince Karl, 1901 K Street, N.W., Washington D.C., tel. 20,016) who had been assigned to work with me by an organization in Washington in 1958, I kept the United States government abreast of all the developments mentioned above, and even proposed in 1959 the suspension of economic aid to put pressure on Ngo Dinh Diem to force a change in his policy.

In my letter dated January 5, 1963 to President Kennedy and members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (a copy attached), I reviewed these facts and drew their attention to the explosive nature of the situation and the ineffectuality of a "purely military solution".

Fearing, nevertheless, a harmful effect of a coup d'etat on the country which would lead to a military dictatorship, I repeated my plea for cessation of aid as a way of forcing reforms on Ngo Dinh Diem so that the war could be conducted from a sounder basis.

On the same occasion, I submitted a program of minimum reforms and a pacification plan which, in my opinion, could restore peace within three years.

Alas, Washington did not seem to feel the danger because on May 6, 1963 a high-ranking official of the White House repeated to me the U.S. government's conviction that the war could still be won with the men then in power.

I do not deny Hanoi's very important role in the Communist subversion of the South, as pointed out by Mr McNamara, because its was from the North that the plan and support came. But the Plan of Revolution in the South was initiated in 1957 and the actual dispatch of men and material came only in 1961, that is, only after the Communists had stirred up the population against the Saigon government at the end of 1959. Between 1957 and the end of 1959, Communist subversive activities kept mounting in crescendo until they exploded. It was also during this period that I fought with all my strength: having achieved pacification of Dinh Tuong province, I extended my activities to surrounding provinces and even to Saigon, warning the public through meetings and discussions.

If a conclusion can be drawn about this period, I would say that the current turmoil lies in the lack of vigilance on our part, a lack stemming from too much optimism or too much complacency in a regime which itself generated Communism.

THE CURRENT SITUATION AND THE NGUYEN KHANH EXPERIMENT.

After noting the seriousness of the current situation, Mr. McNamara went on to say that "the solution must be as political as economic and military. Indeed, there can be no such thing as a "purely" solution to the war in Vietnam."

I am happy that the distinguished American statesman and I came to the same conclusion.

"Much, therefore," he added, "depends on the new government under General Nguyen Khanh, for which we have high hopes."

Mr. McNamara's impression was also that of the Vietnamese people in the first days following the 1-30-64 coup. Indeed, the government under Nguyen Ngoc Tho had proved incapable of stopping deterioration of the situation. As for General Duong van Minh, he could not

impose his leadership on his fellow members of the Revolutionary Military Council with whom he was obliged to share power. No single command, no discipline, no responsibility. One governed only by compromises and expediencies.

It was under these conditions that Nguyen Khanh's coup was deemed necessary. Dynamic and energetic, Khanh seemed the right man for the situation. His government, although not representative of the people, won the collaboration of leaders of a few political groups.

But the longer times goes on, the more his government disappoints the expectation of the people. There are several reasons for this:

-- Although armed with good-will, Khanh does not seem to be master of the problem whose fundamentals escape him, because his qualities as a general does not make up for his lack of those of a politician.

-- The political groups which gave him their collaboration find themselves unequal to their task. Never authorized by either the French, the Communists or Ngo Dinh Diem, political parties in Vietnam are in fact simply former secret societies more accustomed to clandestine activities than to organized and administered operations. Moreover, the Vietnamese people do not like political parties that do not represent them.

-- The spirit of a frank and loyal collaboration does not exist between Khanh and these groups, as proved by the recent resignation of Interior Minister Ha Thuc Ky, a leader of the Dai Viet party. In fact, Ha Thuc Ky complained of a lack of freedom of action and authority.

-- Nguyen Khanh seems too concerned with consolidating his position to the detriment of general order by replacing Duong van Minh's men with his own, thus creating disruptions and schism within army ranks.

-- Khanh behaves more and more like a dictator by imposing his ideas rather than seeking to have them accepted through discussion and persuasion. Thus, the first gesture of his government was the simultaneous closing of thirteen newspapers under different pretexts. His second move was the more recent dissolution of the Council of the Notables, an advisory organization instituted by Duong van Minh.

Harried by criticism, Khanh then promised the election of a constitutional assembly within the next four or six months, a decision considered unrealistic because it is impossible to organize elections, except for fraudulent ones such as those under Ngo Dinh Diem, when three-fourths of the territory are under Communist control.

- Other cultural, social and economical objectives, listed in the government program, are only repetitions of objectives which have been set forth for years. The important thing is to know how to realize those objectives. This is precisely where no indication has been given.

Thus, on the whole, the program of the government is considered more as a declaration of intentions. Furthermore, all depends on the political factor and no reconstruction is possible in the present atmosphere of indifference and general apathy.

- On the military side, General Khanh announced a plan of pacification conceived as follows:

Zones will be cleared by the Army, then handed over to the civil guards and village militiamen. The zones will be gradually enlarged depending on the progress of the operations. As for administration, the groundwork will be laid by mobile administrative groups.

As drawn up, this plan is similar in its broad outline to the one I presented in my letter to President Kennedy. Incidentally, a translation of this document was forwarded to General Khanh two days after his coup of 1-30-64. But it differed in its essence in that my plan gives priority to political action whereas his is based upon military action.

Given the importance of this question, I feel it necessary to devote the following chapter to it.

A CRITICAL STUDY OF GENERAL KHANH'S PLAN OF PACIFICATION

To facilitate the discussion, let me recall the general outline of my plan. Briefly, it is divided into three parts:

- a military part which aims at eliminating Communist armed elements.
- a political part which aims at mobilizing the population in such a manner that they will voluntarily participate in the struggle at our side, helping us discover and destroy communist organizations.

by engaging people one way or the other in their organizations. The ablest are usually the most compromised. But, once enters a communist organization, one is held under oath to respect its discipline, one iron-clad discipline which one cannot break without the cost of one's life.

To liberate the population, it would not suffice to strike at the tentacles of the octopus, because in doing so one would strike at the population. Rather, one must find the tentacles and from there work up to the head. This is accomplished with the aid of the population and the tentacles themselves. The population will show us the tentacles which are invisible to us; and the latter, in turn, will lead us to the hidden head. This is possible only!

- I. If the population believes in us and in the success of our cause; in other words, if it is no longer afraid of the octopus.
2. If the tentacles realize the justice of our cause, convert, confess and help us to discover and convert others.

This undertaking is not to be carried out by the traditional method of torture and imprisonment, nor by the customary administrative procedures, but only by re-education and persuasion, or to put it differently, by the method of psychological warfare, that of a close struggle between our cadres and Communist cadres; a difficult struggle, true, but promising definite results because it makes possible a chain conversion and the sure and complete break-down of Communist cells.

The method just described rests on the fact that more than 90 percent of those who are fighting against us are not themselves Communist, but rather individuals who, not satisfied with their existing living conditions, are fighting on the Communist side for a new and better social order. The success of this method lies in that it seeks the destruction of Communist organizations rather than the extermination of Communists themselves.

Given the large number of Communists and those fighting on their side (roughly 400,000) one obviously cannot destroy them all. To try to eliminate them would be the same as forcing them to unite against us. The most humane, the wisest, and also the only possible policy must consist in reintegrating them into the fold of normal society. One need not fear that they will serve as a fifth column in our ranks because the Communist party normally does not take back former members who have denounced and betrayed the organization. My letter to President

Ngo Dinh Diem on June 15, 1958 (translation enclosed) will give you an idea about the method I have just described.

In short, to defeat Communism, our struggle must take the form of an internal movement; that is, a movement of the masses who, once made aware of their interests and duties, will fight with us to make their aspirations come true.

But, as imperfect as the pacification plan of the government is, it has not yet gone into application, with the exception of Quang Tri province which is located in the demilitarized zone near the 17th parallel.

The full scope of the political and administrative activities of the mobile administrative teams dispatched to the villages in the province consists of so-called social works, such as road construction, digging canals and similar useful works. This is fine, but it does not respond to the pressing need of organizing and mobilizing masses for the struggle.

As for other provinces, the tactics are the same as those used for years, but now applied more intensively and also more disastrously.

More intensively because napalm bombs are now used.

And more disastrously because the war is becoming more and more a war of reprisal against the population whose houses and whose harvests are burned down and whose wives and children are carried off.

How can one speak, then, of winning the confidence of the people when they hold so small place in our strategy and tactics?

In one word, one sees little difference between the current program and the previous one. The comparison comes automatically to mind and it is no wonder that people begin to miss the former regime, not out of love for Ngo Dinh Diem, but for the security provided them in towns and even inside certain strategic hamlets.

FROM THE MILITARY SOLUTION TO MILITARISM AND ITS DANGER

The military solution essentially leads to another peril :

militarism.

For clarification, allow me to go back to 1956, 1957 and 1958, to the period when I still served as province chief of Dinh Tuong. I mentioned this episode in my letter to President Kennedy without giving details.

In 1956, two years after the Geneva Agreement, all of South Vietnam's provinces were placed under the command of two generals, with the western provinces under Duong van Minh, and the eastern provinces under Mai Huu Xuan. Security was a military responsibility, while the civilian province chief's sole function was to perform purely administrative affairs. I was practically the only civilian province chief in the western area.

This was the period of mounting Communist subversion. One after another, operations were launched without being able to restore order. The National Security Council met but was unable to find the means to remedy the situation. It was decided then to try the political solution by returning authority to the civilian province chiefs.

I then began to reorganize services, form cadres, educate the population and carry out my plan of pacification. This, unfortunately, took place at the expense of serious conflicts with the military units in the province in the form of all sort of difficulties that some of them stirred up against me. All attempts to re-establish order by peaceful means were considered hostile to the army.

These conflicts were ended only through much patience on my part and the intervention of the central government with which I had some influence. It was then that the population placed their confidence in me and pacification was advancing at great strides.

I was not the only one to encounter difficulties. All the other province chiefs also met with the same sad experience. Needless to say, it was the people who suffered the consequences. This benefited the Communists who, on their side, practiced a completely different policy by seeking to become friends and protectors of the people. This was the reason for the insecurity which reigned around Dinh Tuong.

This situation was inherited from the French expeditionary Army, with which our army had fought and from which number of its cadres borrowed the attitude found in most mercenaries. To the latter, robbery, house burning and rape were expected during operations, since at the time
terror

was a technique of war.

With the explosion of the war in 1960, power in the provinces was handed over to military men on the provincial and district levels with the result that the administration was completely military despite the presence of a civilian government in Saigon.

Since the Novembre-I-63 coup d'etat, the usual civilian posts of the central government were abolished and their functions turned over to the military commanders of tactical zones who became real warlords, ruling by order, threats, truncheons and prison.

However, "Those who have a tendency to rely only on military action are inclined to militarism. They tend to believe that everything can be settled by armed force; they do not apply political mobilization, are unwilling to give explanations and to convince people; they even use threats or bring pressure to bear on the people; fighting spiritedly, they neglect political work; they do not seek ways of building ties between officers and men, do not act in such a way that the army and the people can wholeheartedly help one another and they neglect propaganda directed to the breaking of the morale of the enemy troops."

The above quotation is from Truong Chinh, former Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist party, and author of "The Resistance Will Win", a book which contributed to the Communist victory over the French. It is included in Primer For Revolt, Frederick A Preager Publisher, New York - London, page 179. It describes exceedingly well the carelessness of methods employed in South Vietnam as well as their failure.

To mobilize the population by force under these conditions, as General Khanh recently proclaimed, will not solve the problem, because it is not the number of soldiers which constitutes the strength of an army but their morale. This is precisely the issue which the present regime and the former government have neglected. Is this so because of a wrong conception or a lack of know-how?

In fact, if this mobilization can appear to an American official in Saigon as "a fraud to satisfy the American public opinion," (Newsweek, April 20, 1964) one can imagine what effect it would produce on the Vietnamese people.

Why then blame Ngo Dinh Diem for having failed to win the popular support for the cause of war, overthrow him, plunge the country

into disorder, then support another man worst than Ngo Dinh Diem , a tyrant as Senator Morse called him ? Is this not a dangerous vicious circle ?

CONCLUSION

It is to break this vicious circle that I appealed at the beginning of my letter for a revision of our conception of the war. Our people are very grateful to the American people and their government for their aid. Nevertheless, it is feared that this aid has only the effect of putting off the day of disaster rather than preventing it from happening.

I do not like to be a prophet of misfortune to my own country, but my experience of the past and my knowledge of Communism and of men and things about my country do not permit me to be optimistic, at least under existing conditions. Neither am I pessimistic, because pessimism leads to defeatism and despair, while I can see that it is still possible to take over the initiative and to win, only if we change our policy and work methods.

Chiang Kai Chek lost mainland China; the French were humiliated at Dien Bien Phu and have withdrawn. Ngo Dinh Diem lost three-fourths of the country and was killed.

This series of catastrophies is linked to a series of mistakes having one common denominator: the lack of popular support, or rather the incapability of winning popular support.

One speaks of a just cause, as if this could guarantee success without thinking that the just cause may look different to the people, depending on the manner in which it is represented.

It is my belief that the just cause is clearly nothing but a question of interests, be they spiritual or material, but interests all the same. And the way to represent it is to present it to the people in the form of organizations, our cadres and our explanations, our persuasion and by our example of courage, self-denial and sacrifice; in a word, by our leadership.

Another cause of our failure was the desire to link the country to one man, be it Chiang Kai Shek, Ngo Dinh Diem, Nguyen Khanh, as though one were embarking in a stormy sea without going to the trouble of finding out whether the boat one is using is adequate while others are neglected.

Under present circumstances, both General Nguyen Khanh and Vietnam are in a very bad position. The best way to save Vietnam and Nguyen Khanh himself, I believe, is to dissolve the Military Revolutionary Council and restore leadership to a civilian government composed of enlightened and competent patriots. As for Nguyen Khanh, he could be given the post of Commander-in-Chief of the army.

The dissolution of the Military Revolutionary Council will have the effect of stabilizing the situation by reconciling the army and improving at the same time the concept of authority in the eyes of the people.

The politico-military system I proposed in my letter to President Kennedy, could, in my opinion, solve the current conflicts with the collaboration of the army, the civilian officialdom and the population in a common effort war effort instead of leaving them dispersed, if not hostile to each other, as they are now.

The Vietcong Communists did not adopt a different system during their eight years of war against the French.

The method to adopt will consist in mutual discussions on decisions to take; each individual carrying out the part of the task assigned to him with the help of another's opinion. The results obtained will be discussed together in order to draw the good and bad points. This is the way by which the individual will learn and improve himself.

For the remainder of my program of action, allow me to refer to my letter to President Kennedy, and more specifically to Parts IV and V which proposed the creation of a counter-guerilla force of 100,000 volunteers for night combat and a special combat disposition known as the "solar system".

I would like to draw your attention particularly to paragraph II of Part IV, in which I discussed the possibility of extending the war to North Vietnam by utilizing two divisions of Nung Montagnards to this effect. In addition to these forces, the Reverend Hoang Quynh, former Commander-in-Chief of the Catholic self defense forces in North Vietnam, gave me his assurance of his willingness to participate in raids against the North Vietnamese Communists with his men. Father Hoang Quynh is the author of the solar system mentioned in my plan.

The Nung Montagnards and former catholic combatants in North Vietnam have, in fact, valuable experience with the terrain, people and customs of the North for the proposed operations. One would only need to contact Father Quynh and former Colonel Vong A Xan, the spiritual and military chief of the Nungs, for a thorough discussion of this proposal.

The reaction of Communist China toward such a proposal, however, is unpredictable. The risks of an exulation of the conflict are too far beyond the boundaries of Vietnam for me to give a qualified opinion. Nevertheless, I feel that even in the current state of affairs, it is still possible, without taking too much risk, to redress the situation in the South, assuming that we immediately reorganize new foundations in order to put new life in the system, inspire confidence and go to the attack with a new spirit.

William C. Bullitt wrote in 1947 in the foreword of "The Great Globe Itself" : "Time is running short. 'With the passing of the event, even the fool is wise', said Homer in the Iliad. On all chiefs of state and on all the people in the world, but particularly on us, the people of the United States, rests the terrible necessity to be wise before the event. Because, after the world war, there may not be an afterwards."

There may not be a world war, but several local wars, or wars of liberation such as those we know in China, Laos and South Vietnam. What we fear this time is that a little later and it may be too late to have an afterwards for Vietnam.

"The American people have the genius of superb and generous actions, and it is in the hand of America that God has placed the fate of ~~the~~ unhappy humanity."

It is with this hope, so magnificently expressed by Pope Pius XII on Christmas, 1945, that I wrote this letter.

I have the honor to be,

Sincerely yours,

Nguyen Tran

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Saigon