

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

10-8-60

Wesley Fisher:

Read this and tell me
when I return what you
interpret this to mean.

J. a. H

Returning 10/21

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

VIETNAM ADVISORY GROUP

MAILING ADDRESS: MSU-USOM
AMERICAN EMBASSY
SAIGON — VIETNAM
CABLE ADDRESS: MICHGOVBUR
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ADVISOR

September 23, 1960

GENERAL OFFICE:
137, DUONG PASTEUR
TELEPH. NUMBER: 22.022 - 21.528
21.891 - 21.991

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

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

Dear President Hannah:

Encouraged by Ralph Turner, I have decided to make a confidential report directly to you on the Vietnamese political situation and our own involvement in it. I have asked Art Brandstatter to carry this letter directly to you. A much more general report is being sent to the Office of the Coordinator of the Vietnam Project, who will undoubtedly inform Deans Seelye and Taggart of its contents. I am reserving this more detailed report for your eyes because of the fact that its contents probably should get only very limited circulation. If the report sent to the Coordinator's Office is mentioned to you, I would appreciate your not mentioning that this more detailed report has come to you directly.

As you have undoubtedly heard from various sources, the security situation in Vietnam began to worsen in November, 1959, and has become steadily more serious. The attempt of the Viet Cong is undoubtedly to neutralize government action and American aid and eventually to install a pro-communist or at least neutralist government. In order for the Diem government to maintain itself and to beat back the Viet Cong offensive, the government was required to hold the Viet Cong bands in check and to inaugurate such political, social and economic reforms as would convince the people that the government is their friend. The government has not been successful on any of these fronts. The countryside is less secure than some months ago (no pleasure trips out of Saigon any more), and, while the agrovilles may be a success some day, their present effect has not been to improve the status of the government with the people. The reasons are that the government does not pay the workers to construct the agrovilles, that the peasants have been somewhat forcibly uprooted, and that the police and other officials have employed methods not calculated to win friendship for the government. Other measures taken by the government have had only a superficial impact on the Vietnamese people, in the opinion of high Vietnamese officials.

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The heart of the trouble rests with the personality of Ngo Dinh Diem. He has been unwilling to hear criticism of his government's actions, and those of his advisors who have persisted in making criticisms have been called defeatists and have been discouraged from seeing him. He has continued to remain very optimistic about his government and its chances, without taking the actions which were required to maintain conditions justifying optimism. Both in the military and the civilian realm, officials are finding that they cannot take countermeasures against the communists because the President continues to hold all the reins of power. He will not permit action without his personal approval, and the result is that he cannot, for reasons of lack of time or competence, take necessary actions. There is a great deal of frustration among various Vietnamese officials, some of whom are deeply patriotic and who grieve at the continued loss of prestige of the government. American advisors in a number of areas find that their recommendations do not take effect because the Vietnamese officials cannot act. The government has acted in the area of political arrests. Confidentially, it may be said that numbers of political arrests are approaching 5,000 monthly, a sevenfold increase over a year ago. I think history shows that whenever a government reacts to unrest by increasing greatly the number of arrests it may be an indication that a government lacks constructive solutions to its troubles. Presumably, very few of the persons arrested can be active communists, or the security situation would long since have eased. In any case, the arrests do not endear the government to the people.

The situation has reached the point where in the Vietnamese official community itself there is discussion about what can be done to break the log jam of inaction. This talk includes mention of the possibility of a coup. The talk would undoubtedly be even more prevalent if it were not for the lack of a real leader who could replace Diem and who could unite the divided opposition sources. Without such unity and leadership, deeply disturbed officials apparently feel that the communists would gain from the splits which would occur once opposition forces gained control. The situation has also reached the point where Vietnamese officials talk of the desirability of American action to end the current stalemate in the government.

I should like to turn now from a general description to the relationship of the political picture to MSUG. At the present time, unlike the past, no one at MSUG has informal access to the President. Given the serious situation in which President Diem finds himself, however, it is certainly conceivable that present MSUG relationships with the Vietnamese officials would be seen in a new context should anything happen to President Diem. Of these contacts my

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relationship with Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho is probably the most pertinent. You should be aware of the fact that through the fourteen months or so of my stay here I have had 45-minute sessions with him four or five times a week, for the purpose of improving his English. Not long after we began these sessions, we became fast friends and our conversations now sometimes revolve around the Vietnamese political situation. Some time ago the point was reached where I was requested by the American official community to report on the Vice President's attitude about various matters affecting American foreign policy in this country. Although I have had qualms about making such reports, I have felt that it is my duty as an American citizen to inform my government of information which can affect American policy. The Vice President has discussed the security situation, the efforts of the government to deal with the Viet Cong, the policy in the civil rights and political fields, the role of American aid and problems connected with it, and the lowered prestige of his government and the reasons for it.

It should be emphasized that in no sense have I become an advisor to the Vice President. Thus, even if he should occupy a position of greater political prominence in the future (and I am convinced he wants no part of this), a representative of MSU would not be involved on that basis. I recognize the difficulty an advisory relationship could bring to the University.

In summarizing the above, I should like to make several points. First, the account of the bleak picture of the present political situation is information you should have, but in my opinion there is no reason for panic. The present unfavorable trend may well be reversed; many Vietnamese and Americans are working hard to try to see that it is. Second, MSUG programs are going ahead normally, except that the fingerprint identification program has been concentrating on different geographical areas than originally planned. Third, the present political situation should not at this date preclude consideration of whether there should be MSU advisors at the NIA after mid-1962, when our contract ends. The political situation will bear watching but, if it remains tolerable, anything that can improve the administrative services of this underdeveloped country deserves careful consideration.

Probably this letter conveys only inadequately what I have wanted to say, but it is probably best that you get some sort of briefing, however inadequate, on the present situation. My intention has been to inform and not to alarm. If I can clarify any points made above, or if there are questions on other matters, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Sincerely yours,


Lloyd D. Musolf
Chief Advisor

LDM/dw

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P. S. As one who has joined Michigan State through the unusual route of first serving the University abroad, I want to say that I have a lot of respect and liking for the MSU people I have come to know. My family and I look forward to our return to East Lansing.

IDM