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11 September 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Motivation, Objectives, and Influence of
Thich Tri Quang

SUMMARY

Thich Tri Quang's political views and present political influence have deep historical roots which must be appreciated if his political position and power is to be understood. After careful consideration of all available evidence, we do not consider him to be a Communist or conscious Communist agent. He is, however, a fanatic nationalist, strongly anti-Catholic and prone to see the Catholics as a greater immediate danger than the Communists. There are grounds for considerable doubt about the compatibility of his ultimate aims and long term US interests. Nonetheless, he is a force not likely to disappear from the Vietnamese political scene and one with which the anti-Communist side -- US and Vietnamese -- will simply have to reckon.

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1. Thich* Tri Quang's own political views and the reasons why he strikes such a responsive chord in many non-Catholic Vietnamese both have deep historical roots. Intense, frequently xenophobic nationalism is a pronounced trait in the Vietnamese character. Traditionally -- and not entirely without justification -- non-Catholic Vietnamese have identified Catholicism with

* "Thich" (literally "the Venerable") is a Vietnamese religious title roughly equivalent to our "Reverend."

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the European foreigner, and with foreign political domination. Over the course of the past three centuries, non-Catholic Vietnamese have developed an innate tendency to regard their Catholic compatriots, in effect, as quislings. Whatever the objective merits of these views -- indeed, despite their demonstrable falsity in many respects -- their widespread existence (even though in many Vietnamese they are more subconsciously than consciously held) is a political fact which cannot be discounted or ignored.

2. The first Europeans to become seriously interested in Vietnam were the Jesuits. After the Portuguese were expelled from Japan in 1614, the attention of the Jesuit Fathers in Macao was turned to Vietnam. A mission was established near Tourane the following year. About a decade later (1627) another Jesuit missionary, Father Alexandre de Rhodes, was sent to Tonking to establish a mission at Hanoi. The efforts of this remarkable man (who, among other things, invented the diacritically marked roman script in which Vietnamese is now written) set the course of Vietnamese history for centuries to come. In 1645, he obtained permission from Pope Gregory XV to expand Catholic missionary activity in Indochina, if he could recruit the personnel and raise the funds necessary for these endeavors. A Frenchman by birth, he turned to his compatriots for assistance on both counts, and thus, in large measure, initiated French interest in and association with Indochina.

3. By the mid eighteenth century Vietnam had effectively split into two kingdoms; during the latter part of that century both were racked by a series of insurrections and civil wars known as the Tay Son revolt. In these troubled times, the pretender to the southern throne -- Nguyen Anh -- made the acquaintance of and was sheltered by another remarkable Frenchman, Mgr Pigneau de Behaine, Apostolic Vicar of Cochinchina and titular Bishop of Adran. The Bishop became the pretender's advisor and vigorously championed his cause. With the somewhat reluctant blessing of Louis XVI, he organized a foreign mercenary army which enabled Nguyen Anh to conquer all of Vietnam and, in 1801, seat himself

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on a unified throne at Hue as the Emperor Gia Long -- founding a dynasty which reigned until its last member, Bao Dai, was deposed in 1954. Thus, in Vietnamese eyes, the Nguyen dynasty seized power with the aid of foreign arms raised by a French Bishop.

4. Despite the indispensable assistance Gia Long himself had received through the direct or indirect offices of the Catholic Church, his descendants and successors were prone to virulent anti-foreignism which, on numerous occasions, led them to permit or initiate repression of Catholic missionary activity and pogroms against Vietnamese Catholics. These repressive acts, in turn, provoked ever sharper responses from the French government. Over-simplifying considerably, the need for protecting French prelates and their Vietnamese Catholic flocks provided the occasion -- or, in many Vietnamese eyes, the pretext -- for increasing French military intervention which, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, ultimately resulted in the establishment of French political control over all of Indochina.

5. To a large extent, the French exercised authority over their Indochinese domains, particularly at the local level, through a complicated system of indirect control, leaving much ostensible authority (with the attendant onus of enforcing unpopular decrees) in the hands of Vietnamese guided by French "advisors". The majority of the Vietnamese so used by the French (and who more or less prospered under French rule) were at least nominally Catholic, partly because the education requisite for entry into this favored class was almost exclusively provided by Church controlled French schools. Another basic French policy or political technique was that of divide and rule. Localism, particularism, and squabbling disunity -- attitudes to which the Vietnamese have been inherently addicted throughout their history -- were deliberately encouraged by the French. In this context, many French officials were not displeased or overly disposed to discourage religious discord between their Catholic and non-Catholic subjects. In sum, the complex historical pattern outlined above engendered a deep-seated attitude among non-Catholic Vietnamese epitomized by the traditional saying that "Vietnamese Catholics are the claws by which the French crab has been able to crawl across and devour our land".

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6. Despite his own intense, anti-French nationalism, Ngo dinh Diem was a member of the class of Vietnamese Catholic mandarins who were favored and prospered under the French. (While Diem was still a child, his own father was almost killed by a Buddhist mob.) Though his name was known and respected among all classes of educated, politically aware Vietnamese, when he came to power in 1954 his active, organized supporters were mostly Catholics from Central Vietnam. This group remained one of his two principal mainstays, the other being militantly anti-Communist refugees from North Vietnam--another group whose members were, in the main, Catholic. Even though this may have been as much, if not more, by accident than design, as time went on Diem's regime acquired, in non-Catholic Vietnamese eyes, an increasingly Catholic cast. Its semi-covert political mechanism, the Can Lao Party, was controlled by Catholics; its official philosophy--"personalism" (developed by Ngo dinh Nhu)--owed obvious extensive debts to French Catholic thinkers and was expounded to all senior functionaries at an institute presided over by Archbishop Thuc. In 1958, after lengthy and elaborate ritual, Diem and his government formally dedicated the country to the Virgin Mary. The extent to which Catholics obtained preferment in civil and military life (something actually due to many causes, frequently including better education) generated the widespread belief that at least nominal conversion to Catholicism was a requirement for advancement.

7. In short, a plethora of incidents, events, practices, and policies--many of them almost certainly unintentional or accidental--laid the groundwork for a "religious issue" on which criticism of and opposition to Diem could crystallize and focus. Analysis of recent Vietnamese history and contemporary events often, almost invariably, speaks of "the Buddhist dispute" or "the Buddhist affair." Actually, this is inaccurate and in some ways dangerously misleading terminology. The number of devout, actively practicing Buddhists in Vietnam probably does not greatly exceed the number of practicing Catholics. Most Vietnamese are religious eclectics adhering to a vague mixture of animism, ancestor worship, and Confucian ethical precepts. The politically important fact about Vietnam's religious ecology, however, is that the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese are not Catholic. In the so-called "Buddhist" movement, therefore, educated and politically conscious Vietnamese can voice their general (frequently unconscious) opposition to the political aspects of Catholicism and their particular opposition to the predominantly Catholic political movement formerly headed by the Ngo family.

8. This background of ancient and recent history shaped Tri Quang's own political views and, even more importantly, provided him with a large, potentially receptive audience. His opportunity came at a time when many South Vietnamese were ready, almost waiting for his message. In this lies one of the prime reasons for his power and influence. However, Tri Quang was also almost uniquely equipped to take advantage of his opportunity when it came. An ambitious, skillful, ruthless political manipulator and born demagogue, he is one of that rare breed that all nations throw up occasionally but very infrequently--a natural political leader. Politically, he seems to be primarily motivated by ambition, intense nationalism, and anti-Catholicism--though in his mind the latter two are probably intertwined or, in a sense, seen as two sides of the same coin. As is amply borne out in the addenda submitted along with this memorandum, Tri Quang is deeply steeped in the traditional anti-Catholic attitudes outlined above. His political successes since May 1963--including events for which he takes credit as well as those he probably did help cause to occur--have obviously fanned his ambition and whetted his appetite. On the other hand, it seems almost equally obvious that despite his desire for power, Tri Quang is loath to accept responsibility. We seriously doubt if Tri Quang would accept the reins of government, even if they are sincerely and genuinely offered to him. Instead, we believe he prefers the role of a religious eminence grise, a person powerful enough to topple governments he doesn't like and to exercise a de facto veto power over their composition and policies but one free from the burdens and responsibilities of actual office.

9. About a person so controversial and complex as Tri Quang, a myriad of rumors, charges and accusations inevitably swirl. Many knowledgeable Vietnamese insist he is a leftist-oriented neutralist; not a few claim he is a Communist and/or Viet Cong agent. Not surprisingly, the latter charge was often advanced by the Diem regime; but there are not a few objective and well informed American official observers inclined to this view. To the question of why Tri Quang wants this power, for example, the Chief of Station, Saigon replies:

25X1 "the most satisfying answer...is that he intends to move SVN to the path of negotiation and neutralization, possibly leading to a similar context for the region of Southeast Asia, within which he would himself be recognized as a leading force. In fact, the recent upheaval and governmental surrender which Tri Quang brought about, it can be argued, may comprise the opening phase of the Communist response to the Gulf of Tonkin, which response is of course most likely to be embedded in a form of violent and political subversion rather than in a more classical military action." [redacted] attachment 4 to this memo)

25X1 10. The South Vietnam Working Group has given the question of Tri Quang long and detailed attention. We have carefully sifted all available evidence bearing on it. Despite the complexity of the problem and the fact that at least some support can be advanced for several contrary hypotheses, our considered judgment is that Tri Quang is probably not a Communist or a conscious Viet Cong agent. This is also the current official assessment of the Saigon Station as reflected [redacted] 28 August 1964 (Attachment 3)--which, in this respect, seems to differ from the personal view of Mr. De Silva. Additionally, this is the position taken in the 1 September 1964 CIA Memorandum on "The Situation in South Vietnam" and is the intelligence community view expressed in SNIE 53-64 of 8 September 1964.

11. On the matter of Tri Quang's alleged Communist sympathies or affiliations, two considerations strike us as being, in the final analysis, overridingly persuasive. First, none of his many Vietnamese enemies so anxious to blacken him and demonstrate that he is a Communist have ever been able to provide anything that merits the name of hard evidence or proof. Secondly, though when one is immediately immersed in current events the hypothesis that Tri Quang is playing a devious, long-term Communist game can be made circumstantially convincing, if we step back for a longer, broader view, almost the reverse becomes the case. Events, particularly those of

recent days, have taken such a turn that a Communist agent so strategically placed as Tri Quang would have had no need of playing a long-term game. He could have fomented enough continuing discord to rip the fabric of anti-Communist central administration irreparably asunder and made an early Communist political victory virtually inevitable. The fact that Tri Quang has not done this--indeed, he has at least temporarily lent his hand to the task of stabilizing the situation--seems to us a strong argument indeed against the thesis that secretly he is himself a Communist agitator.

12. This is not to say that we regard Tri Quang as a primarily beneficent influence in Vietnamese political life; for we do not. Nor does it mean that we consider his ultimate objectives consonant with US interests; for they almost certainly are not. Tri Quang is a fanatic nationalist undoubtedly anxious to see the US out of Vietnam at the earliest possible moment. Consequently, some negotiated or neutralist solution which would expedite the US departure must have considerable appeal in his eyes. While at the present time this may not be his immediate goal, future events could well increase its attractiveness. Though in the presence of US officials he at least pays lip service to the need for fighting the VC and the impossibility of negotiation until the VC are under control, there is little doubt that he regards the Catholics as a more pressing immediate danger to his own concept of nationalism than the Communists. Nevertheless, Tri Quang is simply a force that will have to be reckoned with on the Vietnamese political scene. He is unlikely to go away. Any attempt to remove him by force or stealth--especially if he should be made a martyr in the process--would probably be politically disastrous to those who undertook it. He will often be unhelpful, but cannot be ignored. It might be possible to isolate him or encourage more moderate religious leaders as a counterweight to his extremism. Failing this, however, Tri Quang will have to be placated and, to whatever extent possible, used by any anti-Communist regime in South Vietnam that is to stand a chance of surviving.

13. Because Tri Quang is so important and controversial a figure and because the evidence relating to him is so susceptible to varying interpretation, no answers to the questions he raises can be made with any great degree of assurance. In a sense, each interested official concerned with Vietnamese affairs must answer them for himself.

14. This memorandum contains the answers of the South Vietnam Working Group, but to it we are appending the more important evidentiary documents available so that you may form your own conclusions on these matters.

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GEORGE A. CARVER, JR.
South Vietnam Working Group

NOTE ON ATTACHMENTS:

We have appended seventeen key documents which shed light on the motivation and objectives of Tri Quang and on the problems he raises. The first five are the most informative and important. The remaining twelve give additional insight or information if you care to examine them. Briefly, these documents are:

1. A 10 September 1964 Memorandum for the Record on Tri Quang prepared [redacted] Saigon.
2. A biographic resume especially prepared for this folder.
3. [redacted] 28 August 1964, Saigon Station's most recent overall review and assessment of Tri Quang. (To this we have appended the TDCS version of this assessment that has been distributed to the intelligence community.)
4. [redacted] 8 September 1964. COS, Saigon's most recent personal reading on Tri Quang.
5. Embassy Airgram A-338, 21 November 1963. A comprehensive Embassy study of Tri Quang, his background, his attitudes, the Buddhist movement, and his relations with the US--done shortly after the overthrow of Diem and the end of Tri Quang's period of asylum in the US Embassy.
6. EMBTEL 685, 2 September 1964.
7. EMBTEL 558, 26 August 1964.
8. [redacted] 25 August 1964.
9. Embassy Airgram A-90, 3 August 1964.
10. Embassy Airgram A-727, 22 June 1964.

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11. EMBTEL 2453, 11 June 1964.

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13. Memo of Conversation, 30 May 1964.

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15. Embassy Airgram A-632, 5 May 1964.

16. Note on Tri Quang's brother in North Vietnam, 6 April 1964.

17. Tri Quang's 9 September 1963 letter to President Kennedy and Ambassador Lodge.