January 20, 1962

Dear Family -- there, and away over there, too:

I thought I'd make this a joint communiqué sort of thing, to my families in Tokyo and Cleveland, since what I will write will probably be of interest to pappy as well as to Jane. By now you should have my letter of the 16th, in each case, but I thought I'd give a bit of my reaction to what I've found in Vietnam this time, which I couldn't do in the last letter since it went thru the VN mail system.

First of all, I must say that for the first time in 7½ years I am a pessimist about this country. In the 2½ years since my last stay here there has been a most profound and distressing deterioration, politically, socially, and psychologically. Economically too, Viet Cong activity has begun to hurt a good deal: Vietnam will not export rice this year, for example; in fact it will import some, thanks to the Communists (and the very serious floods along the Mekong last fall). Militarily, the influx of thousands of American officers and men, and dozens of helicopters, etc., is starting to make a distinct difference in the situation, turning a minus into a plus. I would hesitate to predict, however, that the plus will remain such for long, for I find it hard to believe that the Chinese and Viet Cong in the North will allow this challenge from our side to go unmet. Indeed, my trip to the high plateau last week has persuaded me that a VC offensive is very likely in the near future (i.e. six weeks or so). By that I don't mean a major invasion, but rather a heavily stepped-up terrorization operation that will spread even to the cities at times, with the intent of panicking the population and weakening the Diem government.

Politically and psychologically we are at a low ebb here now. I have talked with well over 100 people since arriving here three weeks ago. None of them is what I would call an "oppositionist". But only three of these persons supports the government today with any discernible enthusiasm, and I'm not sure how genuine even their support is, as a matter of fact. And by contrast, I would have listed at least 70 of them among Diem's strong adherents in 1959. Quite a shift. And then there's fear, too. Fear that the Viet Cong are coming, and that the government is not going to be able to move fast enough to meet their threat swiftly enough to save many people from being badly hurt or killed. Diem himself is linked more and more often with those around him -- "the evil influences", as some call them, in that after all he is the Chief of State, and must take responsibility for the acts
of his entourage, whether he knows of them or not; if he knows of them, then he is at fault because they are evil things; if he doesn't know of them, well then he ought to, because that's his responsibility as Chief of State. No one accuses him of wrongdoing, and indeed he could recoup his former stature and support easily with just a minimum of effort. But he does not see the necessity or desirability of that, and no one who does has the courage to tell him. This applies even to those few still with him who are basically courageous, men of integrity and ability, who despise the craven flatterers who surround him and insulate him from the realities of the situation, and who stay on in their positions only to keep open at least a tiny channel to the outside if he will avail himself of it.

As always, the "evil ones" are headed by his brother, Nhu, and his wife (Nhu's, that is). Nhu's policies have formed the philosophical basis of the regime's activity for the past six years, and they have failed miserably to win the people to the side of the government. But he does not realize this, and people cannot convince him of it — when they have the courage to tell him so even in the mildest way. His wife is as brilliant, vivacious, bitchy, and brutal in her Borgia-like fashion as ever — and with the very purest of intentions she is succeeding in alienating at least half the population from her brother-in-law's regime at a time when it needs the strong support of all. She is simply despicable! She is the sponsor, for example, of an assinine new bill that passed the National Assembly by a rather questionable vote: the "Purity Law." This silly legislation, rammed thru in the name of "austerity" and "mobilizing the population" prohibits dancing, whether public or private (except in diplomats' homes), bans dissemination of birth control information and devices and medications, and it would regulate all sorts of other human activities and practices, including styles of dress, wearing of falsies, and so on! Absolutely incredible, and coming from a Catholic, of course, it is interpreted to mean that Catholic dogma is being imposed on the people of this predominately Buddhist country. All it will succeed in doing is alienating the people still further, senselessly and needlessly, and create inter-religious friction where few have existed before. But there are other "evil ones" besides the Nhus. There is the Secretary of State at the Presidency, Nguyen Dinh Thuan, a shifty, ambitious, clever man (though a coward), whom I believe (for good reason) to be plotting to oust the Nhus and push himself, with American help, into a sort of Prime Ministerial position which would raise Diem to a figurehead's post. I do not want to see the influence of the Nhus continue, but the elevation of Thuan is not the answer, either. For this man is as well hated as the Nhus (who put him into his job, incidentally), and whereas it is not likely that the Viet Cong would assassinate Mme. Nhu (she is doing their job for them, too well), Thuan is a probable target for them — or for many others who detest him as a man who has tasted power and likes it very very much, and who climbed to his post on the backs of those who helped him up the ladder.
The US role in all this is, as ever, of mixed quality. The
determined military effort we are now making is likely to
help a good deal, and our increased economic steps will also
help. But these measures are helping only the fingers: the
body needs badly to be warmed too if it is to be kept alive!
Unless this country has a major psychological shock within the
next two months I doubt seriously whether it will survive,
despite our efforts, and despite our money. All the bright
spots which were so clearly visible even one year ago are now
fading into the background of insignificance because the regime
still fails to mobilize the hearts and loyalties of the people.
This is ironical, for this is a regime which has based its sys-
tem of appoint to office on "loyalty." And ironical too is the
fact that this regime, which has a philosophical base (synthetic
and unloved) of "personalism," which teaches that every man has
the right to the fullest development of his personality, has
failed miserably to enable men to do just exactly that! No, I
do not speak of civil liberties here -- they are still a side
issue, by and large -- I speak of the freedom of men to rise in
their professions to positions of responsibility, to improve
their status by their own efforts, by demonstrating their capa-
cities, their talents. I think here of all the young men I know
here, with whom I worked for several years in the hope that they
could become the leaders of this country in the years just ahead,
and whose development has been stifled, smothered, killed, by
the heavy hand of the government. (But I must make one thing
clear: I do not mean by this that the government is malicious --
that is not the case at all. For all its authoritarian over-
tones, this is not a vicious or predatory and oppressive regime.
It is rather a clumsy, bumbling one which has missed almost all
of its opportunities. One might say that this is a country of
unlimited impossibilities! But Its government is one which has
not dared to take the risks involved in implementing its avowed
ideas.

Unless this situation can be changed -- for the better, that is --
and soon, I fear that we are in for a very bad period in Vietnam.

Love to you all -