

March 18, 1954

Letter, Syngman Rhee to General James A. Van Fleet

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Summary:

President Rhee discusses different tactics with General Van Fleet on how to convince President Eisenhower and the American public to build the ROK's armed forces.

Credits:

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March 18, 1954

Dear General Van Fleet:

Your letter of March 6 written in Anburndale reached me the day before yesterday and conveyed many interesting items of news. I am sure you and Mrs. Van Fleet enjoyed the few days you spent in your own home in the beautiful state of Florida.

I hope you were successful in selecting a tract of pine land for Mr. Z Eckendorf to develop. I am sure it will be another worthwhile undertaking and I am glad you have an interest which provides opportunity for outdoor exercise.

I am glad to hear you have talked with Mr. Skouras and that he is interested in making a motion picture about Korea. Since Mr. Marshall is an old friend and such a wonderful writer, I hope you can get him interested in our proposal and in coming out. I am quite sure we can help him find some interesting material about which to write. Of course Mrs. Rhee and I will do all we can to help him in his efforts to get some worthy stories and anecdotes. Perhaps you could come with him and we could have an opportunity to see you and him and talk things over face to face. Please let us know whenever you decide you can come to visit us again.

I am glad to hear that Dr. Rusk has been elected President of the American Korean Foundation and you will continue to be the Chairman of the Board. I have congratulated Dr. Rusk, but rather we should congratulate ourselves on having him as the President of the Foundation.

It is fortunate for us that we have been able to secure the services of Mr. Henry Alexander. I am sure he will do a good job as chairman of the National Campaign to raise funds. Friendship Trains and Friendship Ships should create tremendous interest throughout the United States, and I know your efforts and the efforts of Dr. Rusk, Mr. Alexander and all the others will make the campaign a big success.

Incidentally, I wish to suggest one thing in connection with the Friendship Ships which will bring gifts from San Francisco to Korea. I wish to tell you and the officers of the Foundation that we want to open direct shipping service between the United States and Korea. Thus far all foreign ships coming to the Orient make the first port of call in Japan and returning they make their last call at one of the Japanese ports. We want to do everything we can to eliminate this and try to get a direct run between Korea and foreign ports.



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When I went to Formosa I thought I would have a visit with Ambassador Bullitt but when I arrived I was told he was touring in Annam. I wrote to him when I returned but until this morning I had no word from him. I understand he will soon return to Formosa. If you happen to see him, please tell him I will be glad to see him if he is able to stop in Korea on his way back, or any other time.

If things do not go as we would like and you can not come to Korea to take charge of the larger plan we have in mind, would you consider accepting the position of Ambassador to Korea? I didn't think you would consider this position because it would mean that you might have to go against the wishes of the State Department at times while under its direction. However, I would like to know your feelings in this connection. I still hope our request will be granted.

I have written a letter to President Eisenhower and I am enclosing a copy herewith for your information. Of course this letter is strictly confidential. I do not think President Eisenhower will agree to my first request but the alternate plan may be less objectionable to him because it would make possible the further withdrawal of United Nations Forces from Korea. This would increase his popularity with the voters, and he may be able to get the support of the general public in building up our national forces. I know Secretary Dulles is eager to get assurance that the Korean delegates will attend the Geneva Conference and we will agree to participate in that Conference if the United States undertakes to build up our Army immediately.

I think this is the time to appeal to the American public for support. I wish you would take this up with Ambassador Yang when you see him, and also see some of our friendly newspaper men and radio commentators. Perhaps you could induce David Lawrence or Roy Howard or some other influential newspaper men to come out to Korea and get a first-hand view of the situation. We will pay their travel expenses. I think it would also be a good idea to talk with some of our friendly senators and representatives who might see this plan as a possible solution to the problem.

In my letter to President Eisenhower I suggested that you be placed in charge of building up additional defenses in Korea and at the same time you may be able to build up the armed forces in Southeast Asian countries. I understand that General O'Daniels has been sent to Indo China and this morning's radio broadcast reported that he is not going to build up any native military forces. Whether this is a correct report or not I do not know, but I am sure every thinking American should know that to lose Indo-China is to lose an important foothold in



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this part of the world. However, if the authorities in Washington do not intend to help prepare these forces to defend their countries we can not do much to save them. The reason I mentioned your name in connection with the build-up of Indo Chinese forces was because at the time there was some talk about sending you out there. If such a proposal was being considered my request to President Eisenhower that you be sent here might have appeared to be a conflicting suggestion.

Even General Clark should find no excuse to object to the building up of our forces because that will make it easier to carry out his suggestion that the "United States should get out of Korea fast." I would like to make a comment in reply to Clark's remarks by saying that if this was his belief he should have made the suggestion when he was the United Nations Commander-in-Chief. If it is a new idea reached after his retirement it loses value as a statesman-like policy for the United States. But it seemed a little too small so I didn't say anything. I am waiting to see his new book which will soon be out.

I think I have written long enough for this time. Mrs. Rhee joins me in sending greetings to you and Mrs. Van Fleet with the hope that you will come to us soon. We wish you were here with us on my birthday and we wish you or yours. However our thoughts will be with you and yours with us especially on these two days.

With warm greetings and love.

Most cordially yours,

General James A. Van Fleet, USA (Ret.)
Auburndale, Florida