

**March 4, 1954**  
**Letter, President Syngman Rhee to General Van  
Fleet**

**Citation:**

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**Summary:**

President Rhee once again suggests that the US government should increase the ROK defense forces. It will not only be cheaper to fund Korean (over American) divisions, it also means that Americans do not need to fight in Korea. Rhee then negotiates that if the US government implements the necessary military buildup aid, he too will not take any "unilateral action" for or against the future Geneva Conference until after it has been in session. Finally, Rhee advocates his disapproval of US interest to build up Japan.

**Credits:**

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*Van Fleet file*

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Van Fleet:

letters of January 21 and also of February  
received and I thank you for them.

Ambassador Yang's suggestion to Mr. [redacted] that you be appointed as American Ambassador here created a little embarrassment here. Ambassador Briggs has been rather friendly and I suppose to be working in harmony. If he had known that we have suggested his removal it would have proved our confidence in him. So I called Ambassador Briggs and told him that this suggestion was Ambassador Yang's personal comment and that no suggestion had been entertained or exchanged between Ambassador Yang and myself. Mr. Briggs laughed and said that he has every respect for you and you are a fine ambassador. I told him that I did not know if you would accept such a position even if it were offered to you. So that is all straightened

We know you would not accept any position offered to you with the hope that you would use your position to persuade me to approve certain measures. I would like you to come out as a Commander of the ROK UN Army as a whole. I have already suggested to several persons that you should be appointed by President Eisenhower to be in charge of training and activating additional ROK forces sufficient for our defense without other UN forces. I feel that this may be an opportune time for us to make this suggestion of mine known. As I said before, we need 15 or 20 additional Army divisions plus air and naval strength commensurate to the land forces.

If the United States Government decides to aid in further increasing our defense forces, I hope President Eisenhower will appoint you for this work not only in Korea but also in Southeast



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Asian countries as well. I think you could fly back and forth and carry forward the plan successfully.

I am sure the State Department and the Pentagon know what we would like to have, but I am sure the Japanese and pro-Japanese Americans do not support it. On the contrary, they will continue to oppose such a plan in every way because the Japanese think increasing Korean armed forces will thwart Japan in its aggressive program against Korea. However, if we convince friendly newspaper men and our friends on Capitol Hill and the Pentagon chances are the Japanese will not be able to block it.

Your wonderful article in the Readers Digest pointing out that expenditures which will support one American division can train and maintain 25 Korean divisions came out just at the right time. What's more, it would mean American boys would not have to fight in Korea. I have said that if you were to take charge of such a program and the United States were to give us military supplies and logistic support you could complete such an undertaking in six months' time. We can be sure of it on the basis of your outstanding success in building our land forces within such a short period of time. People have said that this was a miracle-- and I am sure you can achieve more miracles for us here.

I am instructing Ambassador Yang to talk confidentially along these lines with some of our friends in Congress, with our friendly newspaper men and perhaps with some people in the State Department and the Pentagon. I feel that Admiral Radford, Vice President Nixon, Senator Knowland, and Ambassador Lodge agree with us that this is the best suggestion.

So far we have not accepted the invitation to participate in the Conference at Geneva. The United States Government is more or less anxious to know whether we will support it or boycott it. I may write a letter saying that if the United States Government agrees to the suggestion I have outlined above which will take about six or seven months to implement, then we will not take any unilateral action until after the end of the Geneva Conference. I think this would relieve the



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minds of those who advocate the Geneva Conference. I wish you would openly advocate this, and if you have a talk with President Eisenhower try to convince him of the wisdom of such a step.

Admiral Radford's hope to win back Asia can be accepted without much difficulty by the American Government but they do not know what to do. Certain groups are pulling against such a far-sighted policy, and the ideas on how to win over the people of Asia are argued back and forth. As you know, we offered to send a couple of divisions to Indo China to give them encouragement at least, and I think with a little inducement the anti-Communist elements in every country would join in the fight. But Secretary Dulles seems interested in building up Japan and any group of Asiatic people joining together for collective security are opposed to this. However, we plan to work with anti-Communist groups instead of working with the governments since they are all more or less under the influence of the State Department and are not willing to come out in the open against the wishes of the State Department.

As far as the world situation is concerned, our Army commanders agree that with sufficient air and naval coverage we can drive up to the Yalu River. The United States is afraid if we go that far North it will lead to World War III. But I am sure Soviet Russia will not start a world war if we do.

You say that your two articles have not been accepted by Life Magazine or the Saturday Evening Post. I would like to suggest that you turn these articles over to Philip Han and we will instruct him to have 100,000 or so copies printed and distributed at our expense among the leading press representatives and others.

Yes, I saw the photograph showing you receiving a decoration from the Philippine Government but I did not see a picture of the presentation of the Netherlands' decoration. We are very proud of you, General. You have earned these recognitions. We



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are so thankful that we are so fortunate as to be associated with you during this most difficult period in our history.

The Foundation is doing splendid work, and the thirty-three pianos will create a wonderful feeling among our musical organizations. The Foundation has sent out three or four men to represent it in Korea but since we came down to Chinhae about a week ago I haven't met them, but when we return to Seoul we will get in touch with them.

There is one thing I would like to suggest to you which I have had in mind for some time. I wrote a letter to Dr. Rusk some time ago telling him that if Mr. Bevis is not helpful to him or to the Foundation he must not think either Ambassador Yang or I support him. Yes, we support him as long as he is Executive Director of the Foundation but we have no other reason or any particular interest in keeping him.

Not knowing the facts, I think it is Mr. Bevis who has decided to send certain Koreans to Korea to represent the Foundation. We had clearly suggested that the Foundation consult us as to which Koreans in America the Foundation should employ. I think a person who works in closer cooperation with you and Dr. Rusk might be more helpful to the Foundation. This is merely to let you know my feelings regarding Mr. Bevis.

Mr. John D. Rockefeller, III, came to Tokyo and spent about ten days there. We instructed our Minister in Tokyo to extend an invitation to him to visit Korea, but we were told that for some reason he was called back home and could not visit Korea at this time.

Mr. Pei may have arrived in Seoul by this time but I have not seen him yet. Mr. Zeckendorf has every confidence in him and we want to cooperate with him in every way we can so that he can achieve a great deal here. He proposes to assist in the construction of multiple story dwellings and I think he can accomplish more than the organizations and



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agencies now involved in constructing houses here. The aid funds have a lot of strings tied to them. However, if Mr. Pei's plan depends on the rehabilitation funds it will be very difficult to accomplish much. If we could get a loan at a low interest rate for long-term payment we could use as security the land for the building site. We have selected two Korean architects as suggested by Mr. Zeckendorf and they are waiting to see Mr. Pei.

We are running into difficulties because some of the Americans over here want to use the aid funds in their own way. Mr. Wood, for instance, wants to have a large set-up here requiring tremendous expenditures. Furthermore, Secretary Dulles favors the building up of Japan's economy with money given for Korean economic reconstruction and these working under him try their best to force us to buy goods and machines from Japan. Despite agreements we have made against this, they say their superiors in Washington order the purchase of materials from Japan. Now the newspapers in America are making untrue accusations to the effect that President Rhee is trying to use the aid money as he chooses. If this continues, I have a good notion to write to the United States Government and ask them not to give us any aid funds at all. We would rather do without it and maintain the goodwill of our people toward America.

Our little gift to know you that we have not forgotten your birthday is not ready for delivery now, but when it arrives you know our hearts are with you. We are grateful to God that he sent you to us and we have the privilege of being so happily associated, and we pray that He will keep you and Mrs. Van Fleet well and allow us to have the opportunity to have you with us again. May God grant you many, many happy returns.

With affectionate greetings and best of wishes for your and Mrs. Van Fleet's good health and success,

/s/ SYNGMAN RHEE

General James A. Van Fleet, USA (ret.)  
Lubardale, Florida