University Project Cloaked C.I.A. Role in Saigon, 1955-59

By MAX FRANKEL
Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, April 15—Michigan State University was disclosed today to have provided the support and cover for operations of the Central Intelligence Agency in South Vietnam from 1955 to 1959. It did so while operating a seven-year, multimillion-dollar technical assistance program that trained police and other public officials for the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem at the behest of the United States Government.

The intelligence agency's involvement was disclosed by Ramparts magazine and Stanley K. Steinbaum, former coordinator of the university's Vietnam project, an economist who is now with the Center for Democratic Studies in Santa Barbara, Calif.

They cited the C.I.A.'s involvement in support of charges that Michigan State and other universities "on the make" were lending scholars to Government agencies in exchange for lucrative contracts and exciting overseas assignments.

Prof. Ralph Smuckler, acting dean in the Office of International Programs at Michigan State, and former coordinator of the C.I.A. in the Vietnam project, which he headed. He described the Ramparts article as false and complained that the university had no right to engage in foreign operations.

The C.I.A., which declined immediate comment on the article, is known to have had various operational relationships with universities. In recent years, the agency is said to have limited its basic argument that universities had no right to engage in foreign operations.

Other university officials, from President John A. Hannah down, said they would not dignify the charges with a formal reply and could not deal with the massive job of rebutting its points one by one. However, James Demerson, the university spokesman, who played a small role in the Vietnam project, said, "Whatever Professor Smuckler says is our reply."

Prof. Alfred Meyer of the Michigan State political science department said it was not likely ever to be known. Professor Meyer said that Dr. Hannah had alerted the university to expect a hostile article in Ramparts and had conceded that there was "a certain amount of substance in its allegations."

Professor Smuckler had hired Rampart's informant, Mr. Steinbaum, for the Vietnam project. He said he may, as the article states, have been the first to call Mr. Steinbaum that the men "borrowed" from the government for the project were C.I.A. agents interested in politics and other "counterrevolution" activities. These men were formally from the Department of the Army.

But almost everything else in the Ramparts article struck Professor Smuckler as distorted or wrong.

He disputed its calculation of the cost of the Vietnam project, its portrayal of the relationship with the agency, its account of the circumstances under which the university project was ended and its basic argument that universities had no right to engage in foreign operations.

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In 1950, the agency contributed $500,000 to the creation of the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and sustained it with subsequent grants in return for many studies of the Soviet Union and Communist activities. The relationship did not become public until it virtually ended several years ago, but M.I.T. found that the disclosure hurt its other activities abroad and accepted an undisclosed arrangement with the C.I.A. in 1955.

The university neglected scholarship and suspended its critical function in society by obediently serving American policy in Vietnam and advising "on the very writing of South Vietnam's Constitution," one professor, Wesley Fishel, described as instrumental in helping to install Ngo Dinh Diem as President of South Vietnam and selling him on the technical assistance program that brought Michigan State $25-million worth of projects.

At least five men hired by the university as "counterintelligence specialists" and given "faculty rank" operated in Saigon as a separate unit to "counterespionage and counterculture assignments." The university neglected scholarship and suspended its critical function in society by obediently serving American policy in Vietnam and advising "on the very writing of South Vietnam's Constitution," one professor, Wesley Fishel, described as instrumental in helping to install Ngo Dinh Diem as President of South Vietnam and selling him on the technical assistance program that brought Michigan State $25-million worth of projects.

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Ties Rejected by Harvard

Harvard and some other universities have long refused institutional ties and have let individual scholars decide whether they wish to have any dealings with the intelligence agency.

Ramparts, an iconoclastic West Coast magazine founded by Roman Catholic laymen, has been especially outspoken against United States policy in Vietnam.

Its article, "The University on the Make — or How M.S.T. Helped Arm Madame Nhu," makes the following major points:

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