

Tuesday, July 11, 1967
9:40 a.m.

81

MR. PRESIDENT:

This file of memos from Lansdale and some of his staff gives a good feel for the inner political problems of Viet Nam and how tough it is for a young country, without parties and democratic traditions, to do what they are trying to do in the next two months.

Pres file

Not hopeless, but tough.

W. W. R.

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(7/5/67 Lansdale memo to WWR w/9memos)

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TO: Barry Zorthian
FROM: Ed Lansdale
SUBJECT: Electoral Censorship

DATE: July 4, 1967

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E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4
NIJ 92-224
By ju, NARA, Date 8-13-92

As you know, Nguyen Thai is still lying in a hospital bed after losing his leg. Since he is both an exceptionally bright person and one who has had unusual first-hand experience in coping with shenanigans at the Vietnamese polls in the past, I gave him a mental problem to ease his bedsores. I asked him to review the new Election Laws and to let me know where the loopholes lay, along with how they possibly would be exploited.

I visited Thai at the hospital on July 3. He said that he was finding the problem I'd given him intriguing and was still working on it. However, the problem had sparked his thinking about press censorship -- and he had an idea to give me. I replied: give.

Thai's idea: A new, simply-defined law on libel should be promulgated in time for use in the election campaign. Then, a Special Court should be created, for the expedited hearing of cases under the new libel law. If necessary, the Special Court could be run under the aegis of the Ministry of Information.

Thai explained that many of the candidates, on both the Presidential and Senatorial tickets, are going to be subject to libelous mud-slinging or to be threatened with it as a form of blackmail. The present law is too ill-defined and court processes are too clogged currently for candidates to have any meaningful legal protection against libel. A case filed now might not be heard for a year and the law is so unclear that the injured party would be lucky to get even one piastre awarded in damages. Given a plainly-stated law and a way for a quick legal hearing, the nearly 700 candidates in the current election race can protect themselves from each other and from unscrupulous journalists or racketeers.

Since you've been working away at this problem for so long, I pass Thai's idea along to you. You might want to consider it along with other constructive press measures you are suggesting to the Mission Election Committee via Clyde Hess.

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TO: Ambassador Bunker DATE: July 4, 1967
FROM: Ed Lansdale
SUBJECT: Free Elections

The attached memo by Rufe Phillips of SLO reports a conversation with Tran trung Dung, who is a Senatorial candidate, a businessman, and former Minister of Defense. Dung's remarks about an honest election are worth noting. He repeats what we have heard from other mature and dedicated Vietnamese: free elections are possible only if there is a caretaker Government run by Deputy Prime Minister Vien in this interim period.

cc: Ambassador Locke
General Westmoreland
Ambassador Komer
Mr. Calhoun
Mr. Hart
Mr. Jacobson

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By JW, NARA, Date 8-13-92

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SENSITIVE

TO: General Lansdale DATE: July 3, 1967
FROM: Rufus C. Phillips *R. Phillips*
SUBJECT: Conversation with Tran trung Dung

1. I dropped by to see Tran trung Dung, former Minister of Defense under Diem until 1960, at his house the morning of July 3.

2. After salutations and talk about family, I told Dung I was happy to see so many good people, including himself, running for the Senate. Dung said he, like many others, felt this was the last chance for the Vietnamese to show they could run their own affairs and win the support of their people. If the Vietnamese failed this time, the American people might lose heart and want to quit. Even though he was not optimistic at the prospects for honest elections, as a patriotic Vietnamese he must participate to do what he could.

3. Dung then went on to talk about what he considered to be the real problems of holding an honest election. In the provincial capitals and in Saigon, he observed, cheating would be difficult because of the presence of American officials and foreign correspondents, but in the villages, however, it was a different story. From his experience during the days of the Diem regime he knew how easy it was for the province and district chiefs to influence the vote. The average villager felt from experience that his vote would make a difference in how the Government treated him only if he voted against the desires of the district chief. Then he could expect harassment. To avoid trouble he would follow the orders of his district chief.

4. Dung said that his slate had previously been approached by Ky for its support in return for campaign financing. Dung had refused. According to Dung, General Van thanh Cao of the Cao Dai had previously told him about Ky's plans to support six Senatorial slates by issuing secret orders to the province chiefs to tell the rural population which list symbols to select. This is how it would be done for the Presidential slates, Dung said, and the villagers would follow orders. It was impossible to have

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free elections with Ky remaining in office, Dung went on to say. If the Deputy Prime Minister, Vien, took over the elections could be made at least fifty percent honest in the countryside which was all most Vietnamese wanted.

5. I asked Dung what he thought of various candidates and their chances. Nobody has a chance against Thieu and Ky if they retain power during the elections, he said. If there is an interim arrangement for the elections, then Huong and Tran van Ly would be strong contenders because they are widely known to be honest, serious men. Big Minh has some popularity in the ranks of the Army and among the youth and the Buddhists but people know he is lazy. The chief virtue in his running is that many officers will be fearful of cheating against him. As for Thieu, he was widely mistrusted and was believed to be corrupt. Ky was now a secondary attraction and would not add much in the way of genuine popular support.

6. I asked Dung if most Vietnamese he knew felt the same way he did about Thieu and Ky resigning their positions. He said that this feeling was widespread and that he hoped the Americans knew this. The Vietnamese had few instruments to use to bring any open public opinion to bear. The press was censored and the Assembly bought to a considerable extent. He felt, however, that the Assembly might possibly pass some resolution on this since they had voted against the wishes of the Military Council on the issue of Big Minh's candidacy.

7. Dung said he could understand how difficult it was for the Americans to understand what was going on in Viet Nam. Often the Vietnamese themselves did not understand, but on fundamental questions like free elections there was widespread knowledge about how elections had been rigged in the past. It was the rigging of elections, as much as anything, which alienated many supporters of Diem, and he hoped that the mistakes of the past would not be repeated. This was the last chance for the Americans and the Vietnamese to prove that they trusted the Vietnamese people by giving them an honest chance to choose their own leaders. If the elections are honest, he said, honest people will get elected and we, the Vietnamese, can begin to have a Government we can respect.

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8. Concerning his own slate, which was mixed between five Buddhists and five Catholics, Dung said their campaign would be conducted in cooperation with several other slates. One of these would probably be the Vo van Hai - General Huong slate although he had some reservations about some of the former Can Lao on that slate. Dung said his slate was strictly non-Can Lao and that half of its members were new and had not been associated with Diem.

SLO:RCPPhillips:rm

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TO: Ambassador Bunker DATE: July 3, 1967
FROM: Ed Lansdale
SUBJECT: Insight on the GVN

The attached memo by Rufe Phillips reports some intimate views by Colonel Hoang van Lac, the No. 2 man in the RD Ministry, about the current scene. Since Lac was talking to one of the rare people outside his own family to whom he speaks with real candor, and since Lac holds a key position in a critically important-to-the-war program, it is requested that he be protected as the source.

cc: Ambassador Locke
General Westmoreland
Ambassador Komer
Mr. Calhoun
Mr. Hart
Mr. Jacobson

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By , NARA, Date 9-13-92

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By pa, NARA, Date 8-13-92

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TO: General Lansdale
FROM: Rufus C. Phillips
SUBJECT: Conversation with Colonel Hoang van Lac

DATE: July 3, 1967

R Phillips

1. The following are highlights of a three-hour conversation with Colonel Lac at his home over lunch on 2 July. Lac is an old friend who always speaks his mind to me.

2. The Coming Elections. Colonel Lac believes that the coming elections will determine the outcome of the war. If the Vietnamese fail to elect honest people, Lac believes that we will lose the war. Only if we get honest people into positions of leadership will we have a chance. If the elections are truly free, Thieu and Ky, will not win. But how can the elections possibly be honestly conducted with Ky remaining in the Prime Ministership. Deals were made with various Corps Commanders, Division Commanders and Province Chiefs by Thieu and Ky against each other starting in February of this year. Now that they are together more deals will be made. If the whole Corps-Division-Province structure, which is almost totally corrupt, is to protect itself it must ensure Thieu's and Ky's election. Even if Thieu and Ky continue to fight each other underneath the surface, this corrupt structure will still ensure their election to protect itself. Some superficial changes will be made after the elections for appearance's sake but Thieu and Ky will remain the captives of the corrupt system which they helped to create.

3. Corruption. I asked Colonel Lac whether there was less corruption now than last August when Generals Co and Quang were still in power. He replied emphatically that corruption was even worse because it extended directly from Ky and Thieu themselves, although it was more cleverly hidden from the Americans than before. Both Thieu and Ky had been compelled to participate in corruption in order to obtain the support of various Corps and Division Commanders and Province Chiefs. Promotions and positions had been bought and sold, and money earned illegally by the Vietnamese Air Force and the Police was used to obtain promises of support from military commanders and Province

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Chiefs. The Police and the MSS had orders to look the other way at payroll milking by certain Province Chiefs and Division Commanders. The Air Force was running a smuggling racket in from Hong Kong, as well as taking tremendous construction payoffs.

I asked Colonel Lac how many Province Chiefs did he know whom he considered honest men (he knows them all through RD operations). He thought for about five minutes with his head in his hands and said "one." I asked about Division Commanders and he replied "one, the Commander of the 25th Division, but he's completely incompetent." I said, "Corps Commanders," and he laughed. (Lac classifies as dishonest those who cooperate in facilitating corruption even though they do not take money themselves, as well as those who enrich themselves.)

4. Ensuring Honest Elections. Given the situation as he pictures it, I asked Lac, how would he ensure honest elections. He said he did not feel it was too difficult; Thieu and Ky must resign from their positions and there must be an honest interim Prime Minister to run the elections. I asked him if it would not be sufficient to get the agreement of the candidates and the Constituent Assembly to having one man, known to be honest, to run the elections. Lac smiled and said, you mean Thang. I replied maybe somebody like Thang. Lac said no, that even for Thang this would still not be a position of sufficient power or authority to make the elections honest. I said that the Americans were concerned that some interim government might lead to instability and possibly a coup before the elections. Lac looked at me incredulously and said, "Do you think the Army will follow any Commander who starts a coup to prevent honest elections." "He wouldn't even be followed by his aide-de-camp." Lac then said that if the Americans really wanted honest elections, they should use their influence to have a temporary Prime Minister for the elections. If the Americans then come out publically and strongly for honest elections, there would be no coup.

5. Candidates. I asked Lac what he thought of various candidates and what were Army feelings. He said that in his opinion only a small percentage of the Army was truly in favor of Thieu and Ky, but this was the "racketeering" percentage who had no real support from most of their subordinates. He said that if the elections were truly free either Huong or Big Minh would probably win. I asked him if he thought Minh should be allowed to come back. He said personally he hoped that Big Minh did not win, but that Minh had a legal right to run and that his

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right should be respected. He wondered, he said, how Viet Nam could establish a legal basis for Government by illegally excluding a candidate, particularly a candidate of Big Minh's prominence and popularity. The Catholics were afraid of Big Minh, feeling that he would be abused by the Buddhists, while Thieu, Ky and many military commanders were worried that if elected Minh might take revenge against them.

Huong, according to Lac, has a lot of respect even from the Buddhists, because he is an honest man. Huong also has substantial Catholic support according to Lac. Lac felt that Suu did not have much of a following in any organized groups or religions outside of the Saigon area; and that his running mate, Dr. Dan, was limited by his being a Northerner.

Finally, I asked him if he thought the Army would accept a civilian President. He said that the honest officers in the Army, and he believed they were still the majority in numbers, would prefer to have a civilian President. Those who truly wanted to restore the honor, prestige and spirit of the Army, wanted the Army out of partisan politics.

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TO: Ambassador Bunker DATE: July 3, 1967
FROM: Ed Lansdale
SUBJECT: Some Current Problems

The attached memo by Cal Mehlert of my staff is a sensitive document and a revealing one, worth thoughtful reading. It is requested that the Vietnamese official who talked so candidly to his American friend be protected as the source.

cc: Ambassador Locke
General Westmoreland
Ambassador Komer
Mr. MacDonald
Mr. Calhoun
Mr. Hart
Mr. Jacobson

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