

SECRET/NODIS

Thursday, August 10, 1967
9:30 a.m.

Mr. President:

Herewith Amb. Bunker's latest weekly. It is mainly devoted to politics; but pages 8-10 include a passage on which, I believe, we ought to generate a column from Bill White or some other friendly journalist.

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Pres file

W. W. Rostow

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DECLASSIFIED

E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4(b)

White House Guidelines, Feb. 24, 1983

By rg, NARA, Date 7-23-91

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SANITIZED

Wednesday, August 9, 1967

E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4

NLJ 94-191

By LS, NARA, Date 9-12-67

FOR THE PRESIDENT FROM BUNKER (Saigon, 2686)

Herewith my fifteenth weekly telegram:

A. General

Ever since the formal opening of the campaign last Thursday, August 3, political activity has occupied the center of the stage. The campaign got off to a good start and the initial press conferences, TV, and radio appearances of the candidates went off very well.

On August 3, the first day of the campaign, both Suu and Huong held press conferences to announce their platforms. All eleven Presidential slates appeared on television that same evening. During the first three days of the campaign each Presidential slate also appeared on the national radio, one evening. Thieu and Ky held a press conference last night. An Embassy Officer who was present at the part of the conference attended by the foreign press reported that Thieu handled almost all of the questions and did so with very considerable skill, turning in a quite impressive performance. Yesterday morning a pro-Government all Vietnam Bloc opened a two-day convention in Saigon. Saigon itself is covered with campaign signs, almost every wall and tree bearing a poster of one or more of the candidates.

This good start was somewhat marred when the campaign, due to a combination of bad weather and some lack of planning and ingenuity, hit a snag on the first joint visit of the candidates to the provinces. High winds forced the plane carrying most of the candidates (but not Thieu-Ky) to Quang Tri on August 6 to land at Dong Ha, a Marine airstrip 15 miles north of Quang Tri. When they disembarked there was no one to greet them. Taking

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note of the fact that neither Thieu nor Ky was with them, some of the candidates at once jumped to the conclusion that the Government was trying to humiliate them. Although the Quang Tri Province Chief dispatched a convoy to Dong Ha to pick up the candidates as soon as he learned of their whereabouts, by the time the convoy arrived they had already flown to Danang in a high state of indignation. There they were unable to get in contact with the First Corps Commander General Lam and unaware that any plans had been made to greet them in Quang Tri, they decided that Lam was deliberately avoiding them. As their frustration increased, they decided to fly back to Saigon. I shall report on this incident and its aftermath in more detail in the Political section.

As a result of this -- and my conclusion is that it was largely bad luck and not any premeditated action of the part of the Government of Vietnam -- on both August 7 and yesterday we urged the candidates and various Government officials to get together to work out some mutually agreeable means of improving campaign cooperation and coordination and counseled against further public recriminations. I think these efforts had some effect and I am planning to see Thieu and Ky within the next few days. Although a few of the candidates are still taking a hard public line on this issue, none of them is talking about abandoning the campaign. Given our efforts, Thieu's placating remarks, and the fact that the candidates probably feel they have gotten all the political mileage they can out of this issue, I anticipate they will make new plans and be back on the campaign trail in a few days.

I have noted that some of the American press has taken a critical and sometimes highly skeptical view of the campaign here. This, of course, reflects the views in part of a segment of their representatives here. In my opinion, much of this criticism has been unfair and based on an erroneous understanding of the facts. It is based also in part on the assumption that this country, engaged in a bitter war for survival, while at the same time and with great courage trying to establish a functioning, Constitutional Government should be able to achieve standards not attained anywhere else. To me, this seems a highly theoretical abstraction.

What applies to the press attitude toward the political situation applies also in considerable measure to their attitude toward the Vietnamese Armed Forces. There is a great tendency to pick out isolated incidents and generalize from them. For example, in the current issue of Time magazine (August 4, 1967) there is an article on the ARVN which gives the impression that the Vietnamese Armed Forces are accomplishing little. The actual fact is that there has been marked improvement in the performance of the Vietnamese forces and I shall comment on this later in the message.

B. Political

I have mentioned the mix-up at Quang Tri, the abandonment of the candidates of their plans to hold a meeting there, and their return to Saigon on August 6. The next day they met with the Central Election Campaign Committee, the press being admitted to the meeting. The facts of the mix-up were by this time known to all but some of the candidates, notably Tran Van Huong, insisted that it was a Government plot to humiliate them and questioned the good faith of the Government.

In a closed meeting later the same day, the candidates decided to issue a three point communique and also to send a letter to General Thieu about the incident. The communique blames the Government for the "Dong Ha incident," protests Government failure to carry out its campaign obligations, and threatened to take "an appropriate attitude" if the Government does not meet its campaign responsibilities in the future. The letter is reportedly a strongly-worded protest which demands assurances that henceforth the campaign arrangements will be satisfactory.

General Thieu was asked about the incident in his press conference last night, and he twice stated his willingness to meet with the other candidates to work out arrangements to avoid such incidents in the future. He said, "We are men of good will, and we will try to do the right thing." He also commented that if there were errors he would accept the blame. Ky was quoted by Vietnam press on August 7 as saying that he is prepared to travel

with the other candidates; this would be a gesture that should go far to mollify them. They are now considering a reduced schedule of provincial appearances and some of the older candidates are said to welcome a less strenuous itinerary.

As they begin to emerge in the candidates' platforms and public statements, the main campaign issues appear to be peace and the need for widespread Government and social reform. The problem of negotiations and peace was treated extensively and forthrightly by both Suu and Huong in their August 3 press conferences. Huong made it clear that he believes the future Government should not negotiate with the National Liberation Front, that the principal parties to future negotiations should be North and South Vietnam, and that South Vietnam must clean up its Government and society in order to be able to negotiate an acceptable peace. The Huong platform says "to search for a political solution does not mean to advocate peace at any price. It means that the Communists must first abandon their plan of conquest of South Vietnam ... that all peace solutions must respect the independence, the territorial integrity, the essential interests of South Vietnam, and must carry effective guarantees both internal and international."

Suu is also opposed to "formal negotiations" with the National Liberation Front, but he apparently does not want to foreclose the possibility of lower-level contact and "talks" with the Front. Suu also said he would "open the door" for the return of nationalist elements in the National Liberation Front. Suu's platform calls for an "endeavor to bring about a mutual and simultaneous de-escalation of the war in order to move toward a ceasefire."

In their press conference last night, Thieu and Ky were questioned closely about their attitude toward negotiations and peace. Thieu said that, if elected, one of his first acts might be to invite Hanoi to open talks, in the hope that the Communist leaders would be willing to negotiate with a popularly-elected Government. He said flatly that he would not negotiate with the National Liberation Front. Asked about the National Liberation Front participation in the future political life of the nation, Thieu

said only that National Liberation Front members can take part as individuals. In answer to a question about halting the bombing of North Vietnam, Thieu said that if he thought it would help to bring peace, he would ask the U.S. to stop bombing the North, but it is now too early to judge the effect of such a halt.

He Thuc Ky has presented a ten-point program, the first point being "bring about a ceasefire." He has not yet spelled out his peace proposal in public, however. Truong Dinh Dzu, one of the minor candidates with an eye for foreign press attention, is running almost entirely on the peace issue. Dzu proposes a ceasefire, immediate talks with Hanoi, an end to the bombing of North Vietnam, reconvening of the 1954 Geneva Conference, and United Nations membership for both North and South Vietnam.

The other major campaign issue is the corrupt state of Vietnamese Government and society. Huong in particular sees this as the central problem before the nation, and he refers constantly to the "crisis of confidence" which has come from widespread corruption. I think none of the candidates has failed to mention the corruption issue, some more and some less directly. It is also true however, that none of the candidates seem to have any concrete plans for eliminating corruption in the Government and the society.

Suu has also stressed the need for economic improvements and reform. He calls for limiting land holding to 50 hectares, a rent moratorium during the war, the opening up of new lands, plus a number of other measures related to land reform. This program, however, has received little attention from the urban Vietnamese press.

A third important issue, dramatized by the Quang Tri incident, could turn out to be the question of the conduct of the elections. Several candidates and a number of political groups, including some youth and student circles, still feel that Thieu and Ky should resign from the Government during the campaign period in order to guarantee a fair election. Huong made this

point in a telling fashion in his press conference when he reminded his audience of an old Vietnamese saying: "When you walk through a cucumber patch, don't bend down to tie your shoe, and when you walk through an orchard, don't reach up to touch your hat." He meant that while there is no legal requirement for Thieu and Ky to resign from the Government, people are very suspicious that they will use their Government powers to rig the election.

The American presence has so far not bulked large as a campaign issue. Asked about the American role in Vietnam, at his press conference, Huong said that the Americans are in Vietnam to help defend the freedom of the country. He noted that it is a "delicate" question, but went on to say that "we would not be sitting here today" if the Americans had not come to the assistance of South Vietnam.

The Thieu-Ky campaign organization does not seem to be moving ahead very well. We have several [redacted] reports which indicate continued difficulties in achieving the necessary cooperation between Thieu's supporters and Ky's campaign managers. There also appears to be a considerable problem in finding funds to finance the effort.

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These behind-the-scenes difficulties in the Thieu-Ky camp may be reflected in the delayed launching of the Toan Viet Bloc on August 8. [redacted] reports and other indications had led us to believe that this would be the public front organization for support of the Thieu-Ky ticket. However, the Bloc has turned out initially to be less than impressive as a broad national organization pulling together a large number of political groups. It seems to be composed primarily of one faction of the Hoa Hao, together with some VNQDD and Cao Dai groups, plus a small splinter of organized youth.

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Press reports also indicate that the Bloc nearly foundered in its initial sessions because of disagreements between the Hoa Hao and the VNQDD members. The Hoa Hao faction evidently saw the Bloc primarily as a means of supporting its three Senate slates, while VNQDD members had another conception of the Bloc's purpose.

The quarrel between militant and moderate Buddhist factions has again flared into the open, with a possibility that the An Quang clique may try once more to organize anti-government demonstrations. Just prior to the opening of the formal election campaign, it was reported in the local press that the government had approved the long-stalled Tam Chau Charter for the United Buddhist Association. This in effect rejects the militant claim to be the legitimate and legal leaders of the United Buddhist Association. It also paves the way for Tam Chau to legally eliminate their claim to any organizational status.

The An Quang group responded to the government action with a public attack on General Thieu (who signed the new Charter) charging that the move is illegal and that Thieu is trying to destroy Buddhism. The militants also accused Thieu of again taking revenge on Buddhists who participated in the "struggle" of last year. Phan Khac Suu got into the act by publicly supporting the An Quang claim that the government action is illegal. We have some reports that Suu is angling for Buddhist support, and this seems to confirm it. We also have unconfirmed reports that the militants will try to organize an anti-government demonstration August 15. I anticipate that if such a demonstration should take place, it will not seriously threaten either the government or the election campaign.

In the early part of the week, the Vietnamese police arrested five journalists for pro-Viet Cong activities. Although the police seem to have a solid case against them, I am somewhat concerned by possible political repercussions. Some of those arrested are prominent journalists, including the Secretary-General of the Vietnamese Journalists Union, Tran Ngoc Binh, and the well-known publisher of the Daily Dan Chu, Vu Ngoc Cac. Binh has apparently admitted being a Viet Cong cadre. He reportedly also said that the draft press law which he submitted to the National Assembly on behalf of the Journalists Union had the advance approval of the Viet Cong command. The police also announced that the Viet Cong are known to be trying to buy into influential newspapers. The fact that this story broke shortly after the lifting of press censorship, at a time when editorial comment has been growing bolder in its new freedom, may be interpreted by many here as a move to intimidate the press. We will be watching these developments closely, particularly as they are related to the election campaign.

C. Military

I referred earlier to what seemed to me mis-representations and unjustified criticisms of the state of the Vietnamese Armed Forces. Some of these go to the extent of intimating that they are not only ineffective, but are unwilling to engage the enemy. The facts seem to me to be just the opposite. The record will show an increasing number of important engagements in which the Vietnamese forces have performed effectively. General Westmoreland's comments on this are to the point. In a memorandum to me yesterday, he said:

"In my view the recent improvement of Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces combat effectiveness can be measured in terms of their willingness to carry the fight to the enemy, and to close with and destroy him in sharp, violent contact. They have demonstrated the well-disciplined attributes of professional soldiers, and a vastly improved ability to use their supporting arms and combat support. They have maneuvered with notable success and closed with the enemy. They have participated successfully with U. S. forces in multi-battalion operations."

The following are some instances of recent engagements which show the improved performance of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces:

A) An example of ARVN willingness to close with and destroy the enemy took place in Quang Tri province 12 kilometers east of Dong Ha near the Demilitarized Zone the second week of July when the ARVN 2/1 Infantry Battalion attacked an estimated enemy battalion, killing 146 enemy. The 2/1 Infantry Battalion suffered 10 killed and 80 wounded.

B) Another example took place in the Fourth Corps Tactical Zone, four kilometers northwest of My Tho where the 7th ARVN Division conducted a search and destroy operation from July 26 to August 4, 1967. The 7th ARVN Division suffered 16 killed and 93 wounded in this action while the enemy lost 234 killed, 217 detained, 30 weapons and 35,000 rounds of small arms ammunition.

C) Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) are standing and fighting major engagements. The latest was in Binh Long province, 14 kilometers southwest of An Loc where, on August 7 at 12:35 a.m., the Tong Le Chon Special Forces CIDG Camp was attacked by approximately two battalions of the 165th North Vietnamese Army Regiment. The Infantry attack was preceded by an estimated two hundred rounds of mortar fire and supported by automatic weapons. A C-47 aircraft and tactical air supported the friendly elements. The enemy succeeded in penetrating the outer perimeter but was forced to withdraw. They lost 115 killed and a considerable quantity of weapons and equipment. Friendly forces suffered 21 CIDG killed and 70 wounded, four of which were US Special Forces personnel.

D) The determination and skill of the ARVN also is exemplified by a recent action of the ARVN 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry in Binh Long province, ten kilometers east of An Loc. At 2:15 a.m., July 11, the 2nd Battalion, 141 North Vietnamese Army mounted a coordinated attack against the ARVN 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry, using small arms, automatic weapons, mortars and grenade launchers. Concurrently, five bridges were blown and

secondary attacks were launched by enemy forces against the U. S. 1/26th Infantry and a Regional Force compound south of An Loc. The enemy attempted to isolate and destroy the ARVN 2/9 Infantry. Violent attacks by the North Vietnamese Army battalion were repulsed by the ARVN defenders using small arms, artillery, flare and gunship support, and tactical air support. By 3:30 a. m. the battered enemy had to break contact to regroup. The enemy's final attack came at 5:00 a. m. Bitter hand-to-hand combat took place. At first light, 112 North Vietnamese Army dead were counted within the camp and in the wire barrier around the compound. The North Vietnamese Army Battalion Executive Officer was among the five prisoners taken. The ARVN 2/9 Infantry suffered 14 killed and 48 wounded.

E) On July 25, an ARVN battalion and company supported by artillery and tactical air strikes killed 34 enemy soldiers 24 kilometers northwest of Hue. Three ARVN soldiers were wounded. Elements of another ARVN battalion supported by another company, also supported by tactical air and artillery, engaged an unknown size enemy force on the same day 26 kilometers northwest of Hue. Three ARVN soldiers were wounded and 204 enemy soldiers were killed.

F) At midnight August 3, Operation CORONADO II terminated in Dinh Tuong province in the Fourth Corps after a week of joint deployment by US Infantry, ARVN, and US Navy units. Results were: friendly, 50 killed (8 US), 165 wounded (33 US); enemy, 235 killed, 647 detainees, and 17 weapons captured.

G) The 9-day-old ARVN search and destroy operation in Dinh Tuong province, Operation CUU LONG, terminated on August 4. Results were: friendly, 15 killed, 93 wounded; enemy, 47 killed, 128 detainees, and 8 B-40 rockets captured.

This is only a partial list and there are setbacks of course. But as General Westmoreland has said, the results of many battles in recent months demonstrate a marked and unmistakable improvement in Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces combat effectiveness and a growing pride in their ability to cope with the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong.

D. Chieu Hoi

Returnees during the reporting period totaled 504. This may be compared with 261 during the same period last year. The total number of returnees this year now stands at 20,009. Last year at this time the total was 11,116. The overall total for 1966 was 20,242.

E. Vietnamese Killed

During the week ending July 29, the enemy killed 68 Vietnamese civilians, wounded 82 and kidnapped 75. The dead included two Revolutionary Development workers, two Village Chiefs, one Chieu Hoi returnee, one Hamlet Chief, and 5 policemen. Since January 1, 1967, the Viet Cong have killed a total of 1,796 Vietnamese civilians, wounded 3,283, and kidnapped 2,272.

F. Economic

Prices moved up once more this week, the Saigon Retail Price Index going from 293 to 297. This is five percent above the level of last month and 30.5 percent above the level at the beginning of the year. Rice prices were stable, but Viet Cong harassment of Route 4 again caused prices of fish and shrimp to rise. Pork was steady despite the trouble on Route 4, but only because of sales of frozen pork stocks. The Imported Commodity Index also moved up this week, from 209 to 213.