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Friday, August 25, 1967

TEXT OF CABLE FROM AMBASSADOR BUNKER (Saigon, 4057)

I had a relaxed and interesting talk with General Thieu the morning of August 25.

Thieu said that he had intended to go to the joint campaign appearance at Rach Gia on August 24 but that he had not been well and had, therefore, asked Nguyen Van Loc to speak for their slate. He said that he was definitely planning to attend the meeting with other candidates at My Tho on August 26. He thought that it might be a very interesting meeting since this was the town where Huong had taught school and was also his own wife's home town. Both of them were well known to the populace.

I asked Thieu about some of the charges and complaints that had been aired by the candidates and in the press. He said that there was no substantiation of these charges and that there had been no resort to the procedures provided in the Electoral Law for appeal to the local committees. In response to my question, Thieu confirmed that there had been some trouble in Hue where it was reported that quite a number of Dai Viets had been arrested. He said that this had been straightened out, however, and they had been released.

I asked Thieu how he saw things shaping up and what percentage he anticipated his ticket would draw. He thought that it might go as high as 50 percent but certainly no more. He added that it could be 40 percent or even less. I commented that in some respects it might even be better to have a lower percentage, for example between 35 and 45 percent, since it would be much more difficult for critics to allege in these circumstances that the election had been rigged. Thieu reiterated his earlier comment to me that he was not sure in the last analysis that he would be elected.

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Thieu remarked that he understood some of the civilian candidates would probably meet today or tomorrow and make a joint request that Thieu and Ky step down from their offices. He also anticipated that the Assembly at its meeting on August 28 would consider extending the hours for balloting on Election Day but he did not seem to expect that they would vote for postponing the elections, which had been suggested by some candidates.

In discussing the other candidates, Thieu said he had recently heard that Huong might pull out of the campaign. He explained this by saying that Suu appeared to be gaining support and he felt he had already passed Huong. Thieu said that, in his opinion, Huong wished to be the opposition and that if the vote threatened to make him second to Suu, this would be a blow to his prestige which he would not willingly accept. Thieu acknowledged that if Huong should withdraw, then the race would indeed be a close one. He thought that other candidates, specifically Binh, Khanh, and Ly would probably follow. He believed that Dzu, Ha Thuc Ky and Hiep would not withdraw since they all are supported by party organizations which they wish to keep intact and strengthen. Thieu thought that if Huong withdrew, he (Thieu) would pick up Catholic votes and Suu would pick up Southern votes, thus to some degree canceling each other's gains out.

In elaborating on his own uncertainty about how the election would come out, Thieu said there is no real way to know what the Vietnamese are thinking. They are not naive and they are perfectly capable of agreeing to vote one way now and then voting quite differently on Election Day. Thieu said he had concluded that what Vietnam needed at this stage was not elections, but elections that are truly free and fair. He said this was the first chance the Vietnamese electorate had had for such elections, and if this failed, then they would become disillusioned and would lose any interest in elections in the future. He thought this was a very fundamental and important point.

I asked Thieu how he thought the Senate race was going. He said that most of the campaigning for the Senate was

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"underground." He remarked that he was fairly certain that the professors' ticket (No. 4) would be elected since the prestige of intellectuals in Vietnam society was very great. He thought that one of the Palm Tree tickets would be elected, but not the other two. He anticipated that La Thanh Nghe's ticket (No. 2), which had strong Hoa Hao support, would be successful. Thieu also said that he thought one of the Dai Viet-supported Senate tickets and one of the Catholic tickets would be elected. He did not make clear what Senate tickets he was supporting himself.

In discussing some of the sharp criticism of the Government of Vietnam leadership made by Dzu during the campaign, Thieu said that he ignored this type of criticism rather than reacting to it. The implication of his statement was that Ky's sharp comments in the morning paper today that he would put Dzu in a cage, had not pleased him.

I asked Thieu whether the promulgation of the Special Law for the Montagnards would proceed as planned. He confirmed that the ceremony would take place at Ban Me Thuot on August 28 and that he planned to be there.

Comment: We had not heard prior to this talk that Huong was possibly again contemplating withdrawal from the race and will be checking further on this. There have been some indications that Suu is pulling up, and if so, it is not inconceivable that Huong might choose to step out. As reported earlier, however, he had stated to an Embassy Officer that he planned to stick out the campaign.

We have had other reports that some of the civilian candidates would be discussing a joint request that Thieu and Ky step down from their offices. Plans have reportedly been made for a joint press conference August 26 and this might be the scene for any such announcement if it is made. We will report any further indications we have on this subject.