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FOR THE PRESIDENT FROM BUNKER (Saigon, 3824)

Herewith my seventeenth weekly telegram:

A. General

The campaign has continued to pick up momentum during the past week and going well after the initial uproar over the Dong Ha affair. Most of the candidates have continued their joint appearances and since my last message, they have been to Qui Nhon, Gai Dinh (outside Saigon), Nha Trang, Banmethout, Tay Ninh, and are in Can Tho today. The arrangements have been well handled and the crowds have ranged from 2,000 to 5,000, which is a relatively good size by Vietnamese standards. Radio and television appearances continue and the Senate campaign is also going forward in a satisfactory way.

Neither Thieu nor Ky have appeared in any of the joint engagements so far but have let their local representatives appear for them. The latter have not done much more than present their excuses. I think this has been a mistake, for it tends to lead to an assumption that they feel that they have the Government apparatus under such control and can use it to such advantage that their election is assured. They, on the other hand, have given a number of reasons for non-participation. One is that they propose to campaign in low-key. Thieu told me just before the campaign started they proposed to do this because, as incumbents, certain advantages accrued to them and they did not want to appear to be profiting unduly from this fact. The second reason advanced was that because of their respective positions as Chairman and Prime Minister, they would be accorded special consideration by the people and this might offend the rival candidates. A third reason which we have heard, and to which I would give some credence, is the fact that Thieu is fearful that a joint appearance

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with other candidates, Ky might react impulsively to criticism and give vent to some ill-considered statements. I do not think these reasons are adequate, however, and I have told them both I think they ought to make some joint appearances. When I saw Thieu last Saturday, he agreed that they would join the other candidates in Saigon and adjacent areas, and Ky told me that he proposed to pilot the candidates on one of their trips. (I am not sure whether this will add to or detract from their feeling of security.)

As a matter of fact, Thieu and Ky have been doing some very effective campaigning on extensive trips throughout the countryside, turning official appearances and functions to good political advantage. While they have played each trip in low-key, they have received good press coverage. The civilian candidates have also received good press coverage. I do not believe that any of them can have any complaints on this aspect of the campaign. It is worth noting, too, that two of the civilian candidates, Binh and Co, have abandoned the joint meetings and have been campaigning on their own.

A number of other things are worth noting about the campaign. One is the fact that the Government is being publicly severely criticized by almost all the civilian candidates. This is an evidence of freedom which has not heretofore existed under any previous regime. The second point is that these criticisms have been fully reported in the Vietnamese press. The third point is that although there were interruptions in the joint campaign tours while candidates were in Saigon bickering over the Dong Ha incident, the activities of their organizations and representatives outside of Saigon were not affected and the campaign was being actively pursued. In some instances, representatives have met jointly and applied the same ground rules as those which applied to the joint meetings of the candidates themselves. Many of these meetings have been well attended by crowds of 1,000 to 2,000 people. It is our impression that all the major slates have quite active representation at least at the provincial levels and sometimes in villages and districts.

There have been some charges, particularly by Huong and Ha Thuc Ky, that in some areas, Province Chiefs or

District officials have restricted campaign activities in the country-side. So far, I have not seen any substantiation of these charges. In fact, some of Huong's own personnel whom he claimed were subject to pressures have themselves denied that this was so. In my last talk with Thieu, I referred to these charges and he replied that none of the candidates had presented proof of their charges, but if they did, the Government would investigate them promptly.

As a matter of fact, while many Province and District Chiefs evidently favor Thieu and Ky and have worked for their election, it is evident from reports of our Provincial Reporting Officers that this is by no means true of all of them. Deputy Province Chiefs for Administration, who are almost always civilians, frequently favor other candidates, usually Huong or Suu.

In his radio broadcast on the evening of August 21, Ky said that the freedom enjoyed by candidates in the present campaign, including the freedom to criticize the Government of Vietnam in fairly harsh terms, is a sign that the country is moving steadily toward democracy. He observed that, "At no time in the history of Vietnam have journalists been given so much freedom." He again stated that the Government of Vietnam officials at all levels had been instructed to insure that elections are free and impartial.

While it is our estimate that Thieu and Ky are in the lead, and should probably win with 35 to 45 percent of the vote, I believe that Huong and Suu are doing quite well. In Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon where most of the betting takes place, the odds on Thieu versus Huong are even. On Thieu versus Suu, they are 10 to 8. In fact, Thieu told me last Saturday that he did not feel sure of being elected. He added that whether he was elected or not was not the important thing. What was important was that the election should be honest and the Government which emerged should have the support of the people and of the Armed Forces. He said that he would gladly support whom-ever was elected and would be happy to return to the Armed Forces and work patriotically for this country. He repeated this statement at a conference with the foreign press. I may say that I think Thieu has made a good impression in this campaign. He has handled himself

with dignity, restraint and modesty and has not reacted to criticisms by other candidates. During tours of the countryside and in contacts with the press, he has quite consistently made constructive remarks reflecting a sober and mature approach toward the evolution of the Constitutional process.

The proposal by Senator Javits for a four-week postponement of the elections met with mixed reaction. Some of the civilian candidates were in favor of a two-week extension, such as Huong. He felt that it should be brief lest, as he put it, "people get bored." In any case, extension of the campaign period would require legislative action by the Assembly and this, I am certain, could not be secured. Most of the members are campaigning either for the Senate or the Lower House and, so far, it has been impossible to get a quorum even to consider extending the voting hours on September 3, something which, in my opinion, would be advisable due to the complexity of the elections. In my view, it would be very unwise to extend the campaign period. The country is at war and it should not be diverted more than is necessary from this or from pacification, or from the many other things that need urgently to be done. The Viet Cong are intensifying measures to disrupt the elections by increasing terrorist attacks. An extension of the campaign simply gives them greater opportunities to carry on these disruptive efforts. I think the point Thieu made to me is also well taken, that the country is small, all of the candidates are well known, so are the issues. Aside from criticisms of the Government which, as I have said, have been fully reported in the press, the main issues which the candidates keep emphasizing are peace, corruption, security, democracy, and the merits of civilian versus the present military government rule, and these have been repeated so often that the candidates' views are widely known.

While much could happen during the next eleven days, I believe that the prospects now look promising for reasonably fair and free elections, and that with the elections for the Lower House in October, we shall be on the way to achieve one of our main objectives, the establishment of a functioning,

Constitutional government. It is my hope, of course, that whatever government emerges from the elections will take steps to broaden its base through the inclusion of competent individuals from the opposition and that the resulting administration will represent a broad spectrum, civilian and military, of the Vietnamese social structure. I think the importance of this is recognized by all the leading candidates, but we should continue to urge it on the successful ticket.

While the responses to the Government of Vietnam invitation to other governments to send observers are slow in coming in, there appears to be good prospects of fairly broad representation. It is probable that some Parliamentarians will come from Australia and Japan; Belgium, New Zealand, Turkey, Korea and Laos have definitely accepted invitations.

The more balanced tone of the U.S. press has also been helpful. The reaction of the U.S. press and of other groups in the early days of the campaign, triggered by the Dong Ha incident, seemed to me hasty, ill judged, and an effort to pre-judge the whole affair such as you will recall we had at times in the Dominican situation. But your speech last Wednesday at the awards ceremony and your answers to the questions at the press conference on Friday put the situation here in balance and in much better perspective and the resultant change in tone of the press has been most helpful here. Your joint letter to Thieu and Ky, while stressing the importance we attach to free and fair elections, gave them encouragement at a psychological moment when it was needed.

I shall be reporting in greater detail on the campaign in the Political section.

Military activity during the past week continued at a relatively low level. On the other hand, terrorist attacks by the Viet Cong aimed at disruption of the elections and of creating an atmosphere of fear and apprehension on the part of the public have increased. A Viet Cong terrorist arrested by the Saigon police last week told of seven targets in Saigon selected

to be hit by recoilless rifle fire before the elections. A number of other terrorist incidents in and around Saigon confirm the fact that the Viet Cong are stepping up their general terrorist activities in the vicinity of the capital. Agent reports from other parts of the country and captured documents have confirmed the Viet Cong plans for sabotage and disruption of the elections. The Government on the other hand has expressed its confidence that it will be able to adequately control the situation as it did in the Assembly elections last year.

General Westmoreland continues to report evidence of improved performance of the Vietnamese military forces.

A. In Thua Thien province, at 1:23 a.m. on August 13, a subsector headquarters was attacked by an estimated enemy battalion, supported by mortars. Two Regional Force companies, supported by artillery, flareships and gunships, successfully held their positions and the enemy broke contact at 7:00 a.m. The Regional Force lost 4 killed and had 20 wounded; they killed 45 of the enemy, detained 4, and captured 12 individual weapons.

B. At about 1:20 p.m. on August 12, the 39th ARVN Ranger Battalion became heavily engaged with an estimated enemy battalion in Quang Tin province. Intermittent heavy contact continued until 1:00 a.m. on August 13, followed by sporadic contact until 3:00 p.m., August 13. The 39th Ranger Battalion killed 150 of the enemy and captured 33 individual and 2 crew-served weapons. Their losses were 22 killed and 21 wounded.

C. The 533rd Regional Force Company apparently prevented a mortar attack on Tan Son Nhut Air Base when, supported by a flareship and armed helicopters, it engaged an unknown size enemy unit 3,000 meters south of the base between 8:14 and 8:20 p.m. on August 19. The Regional Force men took 3 detainees, one 81mm mortar, and 18 rounds of 81mm mortar ammunition. During interrogation, the detainees said the base was to be mortared from various positions on the night of August 19-20. The Regional Force Company detained 5 more suspects at 1:15 a.m. later on that night. (General Westmoreland

has sent a letter to the Commanding Officer of the Regional Force company commanding him for this expeditious action in preventing possible disastrous damage to the base.)

General Westmoreland also reports progress in the very difficult but absolutely essential task of destroying the Viet Cong infrastructure which for many years has been working under deep cover in the villages and hamlets. For example, in Hau Nghia province, which has been one of the most difficult, John Vann, the Corps senior representative in the Third Corps, who has been in Vietnam for five years and who is not given to optimism, reports that the infrastructure in Hau Nghia is "on the verge of collapse."

B. Political

Probably the major issue in the campaign is peace. While other matters -- notably the conduct of the campaign itself and the new charter for the United Buddhist Association -- have generated some heat, I believe the greatest interest remains focused on the problem of finding a way to end the war with freedom and honor. There has been no real debate on the subject, and with the exception of Truong Dinh Dzu and Phan Huy Co, the candidates are putting forward very similar ideas. Nevertheless, recognizing the importance of this problem to the people, the candidates rarely miss an opportunity to take their stance on peace and how to achieve it.

The high cost of living and the general state of the economy have figured surprisingly little in the campaign. Phan Quang Dan has discussed the need for land reform several times in his public appearances, and on one or two occasions he has attacked the Government for failing to deal effectively with inflation, but he is relatively alone in this tactic. The other candidates have preferred to make generalized charges of corruption. Huong in particular has based his campaign in part on the problem of corruption, and nearly all of the others have tried to exploit the issue at one point or another.

Notable with regard to both the peace and the corruption issues is the failure of most candidates to get down to specifics. No candidate has tried to bring to light any particular scandal, though it would probably not be difficult to find and publicize evidence of Governmental corruption. For example, the charges against former Industry Minister La Thanh Nghe have appeared in the local press (Shiech takes its copy from western wire services) but no candidate has seen fit to use these stories as fuel for his own campaign.

In the case of the peace issue, General Thieu has indicated that he may call for a bombing pause after the election. Truong Dinh Dzu has said that he favors a halt in the bombing, reconvening the Geneva Conference, direct talks with Hanoi, and U. N. membership for both North and South Vietnam. Other candidates have been less specific, however, with a general refusal to treat the National Liberation Front on equal terms being about the only clear feature of their peace programs.

The conduct of the campaign, particularly charges that the Government is pressing and threatening representatives of the other slates, is an important issue. Not only Huong, but several other candidates have tried to exploit such charges. Dzu is among the leaders, always complaining about the arrangements for the campaign meetings regardless of how adequate they are. A variant of this issue is the complaint that Thieu and Ky have so far failed to appear with the other candidates but instead choose to do their campaigning under the guise of "inspection trips" and presiding over various ceremonies. The candidates also came back from time to time to the charge that Thieu-Ky are taking unfair advantage by their failure to resign their Government positions in order to become candidates.

The new Tam Chau Charter for the United Buddhist Association was seized upon by several of the candidates, notably Suu, Mai Tho Truyen, and Dzu. They apparently see it as a means of attacking the Government and winning Buddhist votes without seriously antagonizing any potential supporters. They evidently reason that those Buddhists who are loyal to Tam Chau

will be committed to the Thieu-Ky slate in any event, so that an attack on the new Charter cost them nothing while possibly gaining them some militant Buddhist support. As one might expect, this issue is used most in the areas where the Buddhist population is believed to be largest and most militant.

Another issue, used mostly by Huong but touched on by some of the other candidates, is the alleged remarks of Generals Ky and Thang. Thang's comment that the future of the country depends on the Army and that elected government is not necessarily efficient government has drawn particularly heavy fire from Huong. He has also frequently referred to Ky's alleged threat of a coup against an "unworthy" elected government. (Thang has privately expressed regret for this ill-considered statement which he claims was reported out of context.)

Some of the minor candidates are stressing other themes.

Phan Huy Co takes a determinedly hawkish attitude, calling consistently for all-out war against the Communists and urging total victory. Quat speaks of little besides his unsuccessful 1961 bid for the Presidency when he ran against Diem, while Khanh likes to stress his long revolutionary record.

It is difficult to measure the response of the voting public to these issues and appeals. Perhaps, as Huong is fond of saying, most voters pay little or no attention to what the candidates are saying, but are instead influenced mostly by their reputations and their appearance. Judging from crowd reaction at the public meetings, however, the Vietnamese public is keenly interested in peace, the conduct of the election, corruption, and the proper role of the military.

I have mentioned the charges that the Government is pressuring the representatives of the other candidates. I have the feeling that this issue is less appealing than it first appeared. The public has noted the charges and in many cases is no doubt prone to believe them. Still, I think the public is also taking note of the fact that despite such allegations, the campaign

machines of the major candidates are very active in the provinces, that the press is obviously quite unafraid to attack and criticize both the Government and the military, and that the Government has, in fact, done a good job of providing campaign facilities for the civilian candidates ever since the Dong Ha furor.

When I discussed the problem of a fair and free election once more with General Thieu on August 19, he again assured me that he would make every effort to see that the elections will be honest and that the people understand there will be no pressure and no intimidation. He specifically denied the charge that military personnel will get two voting cards and will thus be able to vote twice. (This charge was first made publicly by Tran Van Huong on August 15, with no supporting evidence. No candidate has since brought forward any evidence, though several have echoed Huong's remarks. The Special Commissioner for Administration, Nhuyen Van Tuong, was prompted by these charges to make a statement to the Vietnam press August 21 to the effect that military voters can register their names only once and will get only one voting card. Tuong pointed out the legal penalties for voting twice -- they are very stiff and are doubled if the offender is a civil servant or a military man -- and the administrative safeguards against such an action.)

Of course, Ky has also defended the Government's conduct of the elections in his August 21 letters to Vice President Humphrey and Speaker McCormack. I am not sure how the letter will be received, but I think it is a fair statement of the Government's actions and present attitude toward the problem of insuring a free and fair election. Copies have been sent to the Prime Ministers of other troop-contributing countries by Ky.

At the same time I should say that I think there is probably some substance to the charges of attempts to intimidate and pressure the campaign workers of the other candidates. We have a number of reports that suggest such things are taking place here and there. Given the authoritarian nature of Vietnamese government in the past and the natural desire of Vietnamese officials to please their superiors, a certain amount of this kind of activity is probably inevitable. The public outcry against such tactics

plus our more or less constant reminders have so far probably served to keep such things within fairly acceptable limits, however. Certainly, as I noted above, the campaign machines of the major civilian contenders are reported to be very active in the provinces, a sign that they are not encountering very effective pressures from the Government in any event.

It is true that the Thieu-Ky slate has been able to use Government facilities in a fashion which gives them a marked advantage; this was of course to be expected. They are also probably much better off financially than the other candidates, though we continue to get reports which suggest that the Thieu-Ky campaign organization is short of funds. Thieu and Ky are using fully their normal incumbents' advantages. A favorite Thieu-Ky campaign tactic, for example, is to hand out land titles. Thieu and Ky have also frequently met with newly-elected village and hamlet officials in what is clearly a bid for their support.

We have some reports that indicate the Government will back six Senate slates. There is as yet no clear indication of the form this backing will take, and I think it quite natural that Thieu and Ky should seek to insure the election of a Senate they believe they can work with. Unfortunately, one of the slates which the Government is reportedly backing is for that of La Thanh Nghe, while the others are not particularly distinguished in terms of talent and prestige. Ky seems to be covering his bets, however, by offering some less official support to their slates. There are also some indications that Thieu has not concurred in Ky's selection of the six slates concerned and may back some others himself.

The final posting of registered voters took place August 14, and the totals show a rather surprising increase of 11 percent over the total registered for the 1966 elections for the Constituent Assembly. The total now is 5,853,251 as compared with last year's 5,288,512.

Much of the increased registration is in the First Corps, and a primary reason for it is probably our military operations and the resulting flow of refugees. Other factors include

the natural increase of the population and a well-organized and systematic Government effort to register the greatest number of people possible. However, the increase also reflects a real improvement in security in some areas and a significant increase in the Government-controlled population throughout.

There have been charges that this increased registration is fraudulent, and that it means the Government is padding the voting rolls. We have seen no evidence of this, and we do not believe it is true.

We calculate that this level of voter registration means about 76 percent of the voting-age public is actually registered to vote. This is a conservative calculation, based on the assumption that the present population is about 17 million, which about 50 percent are voting age, and that in a normal situation about 90 percent of the voting-age population would register. Thus, we estimate that, if Government of Vietnam control were undisputed throughout the country, about 7,650,000 people would appear on the voting rolls. The actual number registered is 76 percent of that figure. Thus, this election can certainly not be dismissed as a process confined to a limited part of the people. On the contrary, the great majority of the voting public will have an opportunity to vote in this election, and the result can certainly be defended as the expression of the will of the Vietnamese people.

Some time ago I reported the results of our preliminary estimate of the voting strength of the major candidates. As I indicated then, this estimate is necessarily based as much on intuition as fact. We have, nevertheless, tried to refine and update our estimate. As I mentioned previously, we now believe that if the election is honest and both Suu and Huong remain in the race, the Thieu-Ky ticket will win with between 35 and 45 percent of the vote. Huong seems likely to be in second place, with somewhere between 25 and 30 percent of the vote. Suu we give only about 20 percent at this reading, though he has seemed to be running stronger in recent days and could do substantially better when the voters actually make their decision. Ha Thuc Ky will

probably draw about 8 percent, and the minor candidates somewhere between 10 and 15 percent. This is still very much a horseback opinion, I should stress.

I have mentioned the fact that the Viet Cong will undoubtedly try to mount a major effort to disrupt the elections in South Vietnam. While we do not expect them to be any more successful than they were last year, the threat must be respected and provided against. The thing I most fear from them is the assassination of one of the civilian Presidential candidates under circumstances which would make it appear at least possible that the Government was responsible. If any Presidential candidate were to be killed in this way, the elections would be heavily discredited. (If the victim was Huong or Suu, the surviving major civilian candidate would also have a much better chance to being elected, an outcome which might or might not suit the purposes of the Viet Cong.) While the main target of such an attack would be the Presidential candidates, the Senate candidates are also a possible and a more vulnerable target.

Our latest report from the First Corps also reflects increased indications that the Viet Cong intend to step up violence against the electoral process. Military intelligence there shows that enemy intentions include the following: (a) obstruct voter registration; (b) confiscate or destroy identity documents and records; (c) ambush and booby trap routes to polling stations; (d) sabotage polling places and steal ballot boxes; (e) induce fraudulent voting and generally discredit elections; and, (f) assassinate, kidnap, and threaten candidates, officials and the public.

At the same time, the enemy is stepping up his anti-election propaganda drive. Hanoi and Viet Cong radio have recently increased propaganda against the elections by reporting critical statements by candidates, comments by U. S. Congressmen and western newspapers which questioned the honesty of the elections, and more appeals from "Front" representatives for a boycott of the "election farce." Viet Cong radio commentary said all South Vietnamese Presidential candidates have expressed opposition to Communism, and thus opposition to the people, which

exposes their "reactionary" nature. The Viet Cong radio said, "Now is the time for the South Vietnamese people to eliminate the country-invading U. S. imperialists and country-selling lackeys."

The Electoral Law for the Lower House was promulgated August 19. It provides for a Lower House of 137 members elected from individual constituencies. Sixteen seats are reserved for ethnic minorities, ten for Montagnard Deputies and six for Cambodians.

A number of politicians are already evincing interest in running for the Lower House, including a number who are now running for the Senate. As the filing deadline for the Lower House is August 31, those Senate candidates who want to hedge their Senate bet by running for the Lower House will have to file before they know whether or not they have won a Senate seat. Initial reports suggest that there may be as many as 1,000 candidates for the Lower House, another encouraging indication of the level of Vietnamese interest and belief in the movement toward democratic institutions.

C. Chieu Hoi

Returnees during the reporting period totaled 418. This may be compared with 254 during the same period last year. The year's total to date is 20,816.

The Viet Cong attacked two Chieu Hoi centers within four days in the Third Corps. The latest attack took place August 14 when the Viet Cong used rockets and mortars as well as grenades and small arms in an effort to penetrate the Tay Ninh Provincial Center. The Viet Cong were repulsed mainly by Popular Force and armed propaganda teams, but friendly casualties included six dead and 35 wounded. Three of the dead were returnees.

The number of Viet Cong incidents directed against Revolutionary Development and Truong Son (Montagnard) Revolutionary Development workers and teams for July totaled

126; 47 in the First Corps, 38 in the Second Corps, 23 in the Third Corps, and 18 in the Fourth Corps. This matches the high for the year of 126 in March, although the number of workers killed is much lower -- 63 in March versus 32 in July. Preliminary figures for August show 60 incidents as of August 17.

D. Vietnamese Killed

During the week ending August 19, the enemy killed 167 Vietnamese civilians, wounded 252, and kidnapped 126. The dead included 12 Revolutionary Development workers, one Hamlet Chief, 7 Chieu Hoi returnees, and one policeman.

Since January 1, 1967, the Viet Cong have killed a total of 2,027 Vietnamese civilians, wounded 3,683, and kidnapped 2,783.

E. Economic

The Saigon Retail Price Index stood at 295 on August 15, down 2.7 percent from the previous week. This figure is up 4.6 percent over one month ago and 31 percent above the level at the beginning of the year. The Imported Commodities Index was 217, up from 212 last week and 203 last month.