

Thursday, August 31, 1967
9:30 a.m.

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MR. PRESIDENT:

Herewith Ambassador Bunker looks backward
and forward at the Vietnamese political process
as we come down to the wire on the election.

W. W. R.

~~SECRET/NODIS~~ attachment (Saigon 4452)

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By ljp, NARA Date 2-7-96

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Wednesday, August 30, 1967

FOR THE PRESIDENT FROM BUNKER (Saigon, 4452)

Herewith my eighteenth weekly telegram:

A. General

The campaign got up a full ~~head~~ of steam (or hot air) this past week.

All the Presidential candidates are actively campaigning. Saigon and the provincial cities and towns are covered with posters, strewn with leaflets, balloons, and other campaign gimmicks. The Senatorial tickets, too, are active.

I sense too a better atmosphere and feeling. There is no longer talk of withdrawal because of pique, pressure, or intimidation although it is not impossible that there may be some last-minute withdrawals on the part of minor candidates who realize that their chances of election are slim. There have been some reports of negotiations between them and some of the principal civilian candidates, Huong, Suu, and Ha Thuc Ky.

Certainly the prophets of doom cannot say that there has not been complete freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Attacks by the opposition on the Government have been vigorous, often vitriolic, and they have all been fully reported in the press. An interesting element of the campaign and evidence of popular interest is the fact that most of the candidates have been subjected to unrestrained heckling. Charges of government manipulation have been heard regarding several provinces in the Delta area and in other parts of the country. Although there may be substance to ~~some~~ of these charges, we have not yet seen evidence that substantiates any of them. Local election campaign committees are functioning

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without Government of Vietnam harassment and in many cases with effective support from provincial officials. Where joint meetings of candidates have been held, the arrangements made by Province Chiefs have been uniformly good. Crowds have been growing in size and in Danang and Hue last Sunday and Monday reached 6,000 and 7,000 respectively.

The comments of Dr. Phan Quang Dan, Suu's Vice Presidential running mate, in an informal press conference on August 25 for foreign correspondents, are interesting. He said that there is "an atmosphere of suspicion" that Thieu and Ky will rig the elections, but added that so far the campaign has been the freest ever held in South Vietnam. According to the UPI correspondent who was present, Dan went on at some length about the fairness of the election campaign. He reportedly said the campaign is much fairer than most people expected, that there had been some irregularities, but some of these charges have been exaggerated.

Tran Van Huong told an Embassy officer that he had evidence of the issuance of two voting cards to some military personnel. Although he may have some evidence that a few military men had been issued two voting cards, we doubt this happened in enough instances to have a significant effect on the elections. In cases where two cards have been issued, we believe that probably it was due to error rather than a deliberate attempt to stuff the ballot boxes. I have called these reports to the attention of Thieu and Ky several times and they have flatly denied that this is being done.

At his press conference yesterday morning, Huong moderated his charges saying that the campaign has proceeded normally in spite of the great discrepancy between means available to Thieu and Ky and other Presidential slates; that pressure and intimidation by local authorities against campaign workers of civilian slates has declined as a result of his denunciations and those of other candidates; simple fact that pressure tactics have been reduced does not mean the elections will be entirely honest "because intimidating campaign workers is one thing, cheating is another." He also appealed

for unity and expressed the hope that the elections would be a means to unity rather than further divide the nation.

Thieu has continued to handle himself with dignity, restraint, moderation, and good nature. He told me that he was received very cordially by the other candidates at his joint appearance with them at My Tho. He was asked by the candidates why he had not joined them oftener and he replied that it was because he wanted to give them all a chance. If he had gone with them everywhere, he would have gotten all the votes. He came in for his share of heckling and was asked some fairly tough questions by enlisted men which he handled skillfully. Ky also in his appearance in Hue put on a low-key performance.

The Government of Vietnam made two efforts during the past week to have the Assembly extend the hours of voting by starting the voting at 6:00 a.m. instead of 7 and by ending at 8:00 p.m. instead of 4. Because so many members of the Assembly are campaigning they were unable on the first occasion to obtain a quorum, and while a quorum was present at the second meeting, they were unable to obtain sufficient votes to pass the necessary resolution. This is unfortunate, as the extra voting time could have been well used.

I have been encouraged by the developments this past week, by the improvement in tone, and by the fact that interest in the elections has reached a high pitch. As evidence that interest has spread to the countryside, the Australian Ambassador told me last night that their observer group had gone yesterday to Phan Thiet in Binh Thuan province northeast of Saigon and observed the campaigning in a hamlet. They reported great interest on the part of the hamlet people and active questioning of the candidates' representatives. If we can keep the boat on an even keel the next three days, I think we should be able to bring it into port and if we do, we shall have taken a long step forward.

The Viet Cong have, of course, continued to step up efforts to disrupt the elections. Terrorist attacks have

increased, the most severe having been the attack on Can Tho last Sunday in which a hospital was hit and 46 people killed and 227 wounded. Yesterday 9 bridges were blown up, 8 in the northern province of Quang Nam north and south of the city of Danang. The other bridge, a 330-foot steel span, is in the Mekong Delta on Highway 4, the route over which much of the produce from the Delta is trucked to Saigon. The press reports today that Viet Cong agents jumped on the stage in four movie theaters in Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon, and urged moviegoers not to vote in next Sunday's election. They apparently mixed with the crowds and entered the theaters in civilian clothes. They were reported to have handed out leaflets urging the audience to stay away from the polls because it was "a race staged by the American imperialists."

As the above was written we have received word that the enemy overran and held for several hours the city of Quang Ngai last night. According to our first report, they released over 1,000 prisoners from the city jail. We do not yet have casualty figures. We have another partial report that indicates the Hue radio station, which is located some distance outside the city, was under attack early this morning.

Unlike the situation in the elections for the Assembly in September of last year, the Viet Cong now have mortars and heavier weapons than they then possessed. In spite of stepped up efforts, however, I do not believe that they will have any significant success in disrupting the elections in view of the very thorough measures being taken by both the Vietnamese Armed Forces and U.S. forces.

One effective measure to counter the Viet Cong efforts has been the Incentive Awards System established [redacted] to encourage Vietnamese to report on the Viet Cong. This paid handsome dividends on July 31. A tip from a civilian led to the arrest of a sabotage unit credited with a majority of the terrorist incidents which have occurred in Saigon. The Commander of the unit was captured on the very

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day that he was to have conducted a Claymore mine attack on the building in downtown Saigon which is both a senior American officers' billet and headquarters of the Joint United States Public Affairs Office.

The leader of the sabotage group had directed 27 terrorist incidents in Saigon, including the bombing of two American military billets and a restaurant frequented by our military. He was directly responsible for the death of 15 Americans and the wounding of 56.

With the roundup of the sabotage unit, 22 terrorists were arrested and several arms caches uncovered, containing grenades, Claymore mines, TNT and material for the manufacture of explosive devices.

Tips from citizens responding to the [redacted] have resulted in the arrest of numerous other Viet Cong concerned with both political and military activities, and the discovery of a sizeable number of weapons caches.

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As might be expected, there have been some reports of possible trouble after the elections, perhaps generated by the extremist Buddhists if they feel that an atmosphere exists which can be exploited. They have in fact played a very passive role during the pre-election period, and, as Thieu remarked to me not long ago, it may be that they are waiting the election outcome to see whether they can initiate something. The likelihood of such action will, of course, depend on the outcome itself and on the atmosphere that then prevails, which is difficult to predict. I am confident, however, that the Government will be able to handle any such problems if they should arise. I will, of course, be talking with Thieu and Ky about their immediate post-election moves, assuming they are elected, as these will be very important in terms of the atmosphere which will prevail at that time.

B. Political

In April of 1966 the Government reluctantly agreed to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly. Acting

under what appeared to be the imminent threat of a massive Buddhist upheaval, they thus set in motion a long chain of political events which comes to a new climax four days from now. It has been an instructive experience for all concerned, as well as a most hopeful beginning for a new political era in this country, and I think the record is worth scanning as we near election eve.

In April of 1966, the Vietnamese Government was an almost pure military junta with very little civilian participation or support. It was vulnerable to Communist charges of being illegal and not representative of the Vietnamese people.

The decision to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly was in large measure forced on the military junta. Nevertheless, I think that the military leadership must be credited with seeing, after the fact at least, the great value of that step. The immediate result was to deprive the Buddhist extremists of a meaningful political issue. In the long run, however, that decision turned out to be the start of an increasingly effective political offensive against the Communists. It is a truism that military means alone cannot win this war. The move toward democratic institutions has proved to be an effective political complement to our military offensive, and I think the military leaders have grasped that fact.

One reason for the effectiveness of the political offensive is that it was tended to change the nature of the political opposition. In the past, about the only means for changing the government or even effectively influencing its policies, were violent. Demonstrations and coups were the natural thoughts of most "out" politicians. Those who became desperate turned to the Viet Cong, the ultimate source of violence in this country.

With the move toward Constitutional government, it became possible to express opposition in non-violent ways. Political opposition was channeled into legal and constructive efforts: first, to win election to the Constituent Assembly, then to influence the writing of the Constitution and the Electoral Laws, now to compete in the current national elections.

While it must be admitted that political stability here is by no means achieved and the past months have been a perilous journey, I believe that channeling the political opposition into legal and non-violent avenues has contributed heavily to the degree of stability which has existed. It has also begun a move toward more real and permanent political stability. This move now has some momentum behind it, and we have the hope that it will continue to gain momentum.

Another reason for the effectiveness of the political offensive against the Viet Cong is the educational effect it has on all Vietnamese, civilian as well as military. The hammering out of the Constitution was accompanied by many clashes of opinion and interest. At several points it seemed that the work of the Assembly might never be completed. Even after the Constitution was finished, the military leadership appeared to be so opposed to some features of the document that we feared they might radically amend it or even reject it out of hand. Good sense and political compromises prevailed, however. In the process, the military learned that they could, indeed must, work with the civilians. The civilian politicians, for their part, had a lesson in dealing with the military that will stand them in good stead in the future. I think that both military and civilian leaders now realize that it is possible to work together toward shared objectives while still disagreeing about many other things.

There were hazards, grave hazards, passed by the past year. One of these was the threat to military unity which the very process of democratization itself seemed to inspire. The merger of the Thieu-Ky Presidential slates has not entirely removed that threat, but it did demonstrate that the Vietnamese military are fully aware of the danger and will act to avoid it.

Another threat was the deliberate effort to exploit regional differences in last fall's Cabinet crisis. I think it a sign of increased political maturity that regionalism has been muted and denied in the election campaign. All of the candidates are bidding for all the electorate, and none of them has made an effort to exploit purely regional prejudice.

The campaign itself has been perhaps the single greatest experience for the Vietnamese politicians and their people. An unprecedented freedom of expression, including a completely uncensored press, has shown all Vietnamese that even here and under wartime conditions, it is possible to tolerate a great measure of dissent, a fact which has not in the past been much appreciated by Vietnamese leaders.

I have the impression that the campaign has also tended to instill a new respect for the limits of responsible criticism, indeed perhaps even a new respect for fact. In a society which has long been known for its addiction to wild rumors and extreme suspicion, this is important for future stability.

All of this is progress, but we are by no means home. If, as seems most likely, Thieu and Ky win the election, there is a possibility that certain of the defeated candidates may band together in an effort to invalidate or at least discredit the election. I am not persuaded that the civilian politicians -- to say nothing of the military -- yet have a full understanding of the role of a loyal opposition. Both the Viet Cong and the extreme Buddhists will be doing all they can to encourage the defeated candidates to adopt measures and postures which will make it hard for the elected leaders to form a broadly based government and an effective military-civilian partnership.

There is also the continuing problem of the relationship between Thieu and Ky. I think this is by no means fully sorted out, and we may be in for some difficult moments while they establish their future roles. I am essentially optimistic, however, that they have both realized the necessity to work together, no matter how painful it may be.

The campaign continued this week with joint appearances by the Presidential candidates in Rach Gia, My Tho, Danang, and Hue. They are meeting today in Gia Dinh. There is a scheduled appearance in Cholon tomorrow, and the final joint meeting with the public is to take place in front of City Hall here in Saigon on September 1.

General Thieu appeared with the other candidates for the first time in My Tho on August 26, and Prime Minister Ky made his first joint appearance in Hue two days later. All the meetings have gone smoothly, with the candidates sticking largely to the same issues which I described in my last report. Crowd response was quite good, with many pointed questions and much enthusiasm for the favorite candidates.

In his appearance in My Tho, General Thieu stressed the effort to bring peace. He said that if elected, he would seek contact with Hanoi, and if Hanoi asked for a gesture of good will as a condition for negotiations, he would recommend a bombing pause for one week. However, if Hanoi continues its aggression, there will be no alternative but to fight on.

The previous day, in a meeting with some invited foreign correspondents, Thieu made essentially the same points about a bombing pause. In addition, he said he had not discussed the proposal with the U.S. but felt that we could be favorably disposed toward it. He also said that any extension of such a bombing pause would depend on the "good will and sincerity of Hanoi" and their response to his gesture. I will want to talk over these vital subjects with him at an early date, since it is essential that our efforts in these directions be coordinated.

In the same meeting with foreign correspondents, Thieu said that while he would not engage in any formal negotiations with the Liberation Front, he is willing to undertake informal talks with them. In response to a question, Thieu said that he would guarantee safe passage in and out of Saigon for any Front representatives who wished to hold such informal talks with the Government. This general attitude of willingness to talk with the National Liberation Front leaders is an encouraging one.

Thieu also publicly disclosed that the Armed Forces Council has decided to sack five general officers and will bring some fifty officers before the Armed Forces Disciplinary Council. In most cases, Thieu said, the charge against the officers involved is corruption.

I asked Prime Minister Ky about the plans to dismiss a number of officers on charges of corruption the following day. Ky said that the action would not be undertaken until after the election, and he remarked that there is evidence of corruption against 20 to 30 general officers. General Vien plans to call in the officers concerned, one by one, and confront them with the evidence. The officers concerned will be permitted to resign rather than being formally charged, according to Ky.

General Westmoreland and I will be watching this development closely to see that it does not have an adverse effect on military unity and morale.

Charges of government pressures on the representatives of the civilian candidates have tapered off, as I indicated earlier. One example of such pressures is the arrest of 19 Dai Viet workers in Hue. They were subsequently released, but one of them was severely beaten by the police. The Dai Viets in question seem to have been in the wrong to the extent that they resisted arrest and also apparently had some hidden arms. The official responsible for the arrests was evidently acting on his own initiative, and we think it is a case of both excess of zeal and lack of intelligence.

Nevertheless, Dai Viet leaders have made much of the incident. Ha Thuc Ky held a press conference on August 25 to protest this incident and other alleged instances of pressures on his workers. In answer to a question, he at one point said he would mount protest demonstrations if such incidents continue. In Hue, Dai Viet Party members were talking about resigning their Government jobs en masse as a form of protest. The echoes of this affair appear to be diminishing, however, and there now seems very little likelihood that the Dai Viets will either demonstrate or resign from their Government jobs, at least prior to the election.

We also have reports that suggest some pressures were exerted to insure a Thieu-Ky victory in Go Cong, Kontum, and Pleiku provinces. In Go Cong, for example, the Huong representative claims that threats have been made on his life if he continues to work for Huong. Also, according to the Go Cong Deputy Chief of Province for Administration, the Go Cong Province Chief is alleged to have ordered his subordinates to work for the Thieu-Ky ticket. These claims still represent hearsay, of course, and we will have to see if any of them can be substantiated.

In the Senate race, alleged Government support for several lists has generated a last-minute flurry of protest by the other slates. Last night representatives of nearly all slates met to consider what joint action they might take. The meeting broke up after much disorderly shouting, but a rump session was later reconvened. Seven in the rump session the Senate slates represented were unable to reach a common position, and they finally adjourned after charging Nguyen Tuong Ba (a VNQDD candidate) with the responsibility of drafting a joint statement. As there was no agreement on what the contents of the statement should be, Ba has a rather formidable task before him. Indication of Government support for certain lists seems a fairly natural thing to me, however. The Saigon Post headlined this story today in the following colorful terms: "Senatorial Bets Meet, Swap Threats, Saliva-Democracy a la Vietnamienne at Work."

I raised the question of the Dai Viet arrests with Ky last Friday. He said there is a continuing problem there because the Dai Viets, the VNQDD, and the extremist Buddhist are carrying on a constant factional struggle. He said that this particular struggle is not necessarily related to the elections, and he believes the radical Buddhists are trying to stir up the pot in whatever way they can.

It seems probable now that such charges of Government pressure and illegal tactics will have little or no effect on events until after the election. The militant Buddhists, for example, have reportedly decided to attempt no anti-Government demonstrations until after the elections. They no doubt feel their chances of finding allies in the defeated candidates will enhance their chances of undermining the Government at that time.

Evidently as a near final move in their election campaign, General Thieu and General Ky flew to Banmethout yesterday to promulgate the Montagnard Statu Particullier and a Highlander Land Law. Both decrees have been much desired by Montagnard leaders, and their promulgation now is an obvious but probably quite effective bid for the Montagnard vote and his speech at Banmethout -- delivered off the cuff in a driving rainstorm to several thousand Montagnards and military personnel -- General Thieu not only called for a continuation of the positive programs and policies of his Government but also warned military and police personnel that they must not interfere with the people's right to free choice.

We are, of course, expecting the distinguished American observer delegation this evening. I am looking forward to seeing them and discussing with them the best ways for their mission to be performed and made effective in terms of impact here and abroad.

As matters now stand, we expect well over sixty observers from fifteen countries, including a delegation

from the Asian Parliamentary Union. These countries which we know are sending observers include Belgium, Japan, Philippines, United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands, Spain, Laos, Korea, New Zealand, Greece, Malaysia, Turkey, and Thailand as well as the United States.

C. Economic

The Saigon Retail Price Index rose two points since last week, up from 295 to 297. This is 30 percent over the level at the beginning of the year. The Imported Commodity Index is now 222, up five points from last week's 217.

The construction of the port facilities at Qui Nhon is now complete. However, some errors in construction must be remedied before the facility will be ready for use.

The Joint U. S. - Vietnamese Economic Committee met August 26 and took several decisions concerning the Commercial Import Program. It was agreed that two positive lists will be prepared, one by USAID listing all commodities which may be imported under the Commercial Import Program, and a second list by the Government of Vietnam listing other commodities, the import of which the Government will finance. The Government of Vietnam list will cover essentially all items not eligible for Commercial Import Program financing. The lists will be exclusive in that no item will be eligible for financing both with Commercial Import Program funds and with Government of Vietnam foreign exchange.

D. Chieu Hoi

Returnees during the reporting period totaled 519. This may be compared with 280 during the same period last year. The year's total to date is 21,335.

E. Vietnamese Killed

During the week ending August 26, the enemy killed **60** Vietnamese civilians, wounded 86 and kidnapped **61**. The dead included 3 Revolutionary Development workers, one Village Chief, one Hamlet Chief, and two Census Grivance workers.

Since January 1, 1967, the Viet Cong killed a total of 2,087 Vietnamese civilians, wounded 3,770 and kidnapped 2,844.