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Friday, August 11, 1967
9:55 a.m.

Pres file

Mr. President:

Herewith Bill Jordan's draft of a proposed speech before noon today in the Senate.

Nick Katzenbach is dealing with both a Bunker response to the Bingham document and will mount a backgrounder this morning.

W. W. Rostow

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Mr. President:

A number of our colleagues -- in this body and in the House -- have been expressing some concern about the coming elections in Viet-Nam.

And some of the concern has taken the form of strong criticism -- of this or that aspect of the campaign now underway.

Mr. President, we politicians are supposed to be hard-headed and realistic. But I find, in some of the criticism I read, a notably lack of these qualities.

Viet-Nam is not a placid township in upperstate New York or a quiet county in Illinois. It is not an old and established state with a long democratic tradition.

And It is not, Mr. President, a humble puppet that will jump through the hoop at our bidding. Nor do I think we would want it to be.

Viet-Nam is a country at war.

It is a country that is trying desperately to lay the first foundation-stones of a democratic system.

It is a country that is creating its own institutions in its own way.

It is groping for the right way to do things, the way that will satisfy most of its own people.

It is making mistakes. And it is going to make some more.

And when it stops making mistakes, we can all go there and learn a few lessons.

What are the complaints of our learned colleagues who are not happy about the electoral process in Viet-Nam?

I can only gather that they are unhappy that full-fledged democracy has not suddenly been born in the troubled countryside of Viet-Nam.

They seem to expect the Vietnamese to do in a few months what we and others have been trying to do for nearly two centuries -- not always with unblemished success.

They pay no attention to the amazing fact that the Vietnamese people are having any elections at all.

They do not recognize the astonishing feat of the Vietnamese in writing a thoroughly democratic constitution in the midst of a vicious war.

They say nothing about the political vitality of a country that can produce eleven leading citizens to contend for the presidency -- and 480 men and women who are ready to put their reputations -- and even their lives -- on the line to run for their new Senate of 60 members.

And, finally, they ignore the fact that the Vietnamese Communists -- recognizing the threat these elections represent to their purposes -- have sworn to do all in their power to disrupt or prevent them.

What are the complaints some of our colleagues feel so deeply about?

First, they complain of an alleged statement by Prime Minister Ky that he would carry out a coup if the elections produced a government he didn't like.

I have read reports of that statement, Mr. ^{President}~~Speaker~~, on page 1 of several newspapers.

A few days ago, I read his denial of the statement on page 11 of one newspaper. Another that carried the original allegation didn't see fit to report his denial.

General Ky said that any future government must work for the poor people of Viet-Nam -- and that any government that fails to work on their behalf would surely be opposed by the people.

Speaking of himself and General Thieu, he said:

"If we were elected this time and failed to carry out our plans for a social revolution, I'm sure that the people -- including the armed forces -- would ask us to go home."

Now, we may not appreciate that approach to the legitimacy of elected government. But it is no less inflammatory than some of the statements of Thomas Jefferson or John Adams when our nation was being born.

In any case, most of us have learned to pay more attention to what Prime Minister Ky does than what he says. I recall violent protests on this floor when a year or so ago he spoke about invading North Viet-Nam. He said it -- but he didn't do it.

And I suspect his statement on a future government was more electioneering than cold hard threat. Because he knows perfectly well

what the reaction would be here -- in Viet-Nam -- and elsewhere -- to a coup against an elected government.

Second, our friends complain that some generals -- unnamed generals, to be sure -- are plotting to rule South Viet-Nam whatever the election produces.

It may be true that a few generals have this notion in mind. But could they succeed against a government fairly and honestly elected? Would the Vietnamese people sit still for it? I doubt it. And I doubt that any Vietnamese who has shown the courage and the patriotism to seek high office in free elections would be willing to meekly accept any such arrangement.

Finally, the critics refer to the recent incident at Quang Tri when some presidential candidates were unable to meet with the voters as scheduled.

What was the "incident" at Quang Tri?

A government plane flew several candidates to the northern province for a scheduled joint campaign meeting. The meeting had been well publicized. Hundreds of people had gathered to hear the politicians speak.

The plane made a pass at the dirt runway. There was a vicious cross-wind. The pilot judged that a landing was unsafe. So he flew to

the nearest safe airport only nine miles away.

I hesitate to think, Mr. President, what some of the critics would be saying today if he had gone ahead and tried to land -- and had cracked up, killing some or most of the candidates.

There was some confusion of the unplanned landing. A convoy was sent out from Quang Tri by the authorities to pick up the candidates. But they had decided to leave before it arrived. An offer of U.S. transportation by the base authorities was turned down.

And somewhere along the line, the candidates recognized a political issue when it stared them in the face. They knew this was something they could use to attack the government. And they used it.

Is it so strange, Mr. President? Is it unheard of? And is it something that American politicians must "view with concern?"

How many men in this chamber have failed to keep a political date because a plane had engine trouble? Or an airport was socked in? And how many of us have complained when a local reception committee didn't perform well?

If the Quang Tri incident is the best the critics can find to attack the Vietnamese elections, they are in bad shape.

It is interesting, Mr. President, that the source of most of the criticism comes from newspaper reports from Saigon.

It is interesting because every development in this election campaign, however minor, is being reported in the most intimate detail. The largest press corps in the world is following every twist and turn -- and sending it back for our information every day.

There is no censorship of those reports -- as there is in so many places in the world.

And just a few weeks ago, the Vietnamese government lifted all censorship from its own press so that the statements and activities of all candidates would be freely and fully reported.

That, I suggest, is not a bad record for a young country -- one unused to democratic practices -- and one that is in the midst of a war for its very survival.

But that is not all.

The Government in Saigon formally requested the Secretary General of the United Nations on July 20 to send observers to Viet-Nam to watch the elections. That request, unfortunately, was turned down.

The Vietnamese have asked the large diplomatic corps to send its people anywhere in the country they like to observe the electoral process.

Are these the actions of a government that is determined to carry out elections by every illegal and unfair means? Is it the way a political machine works that is trying to steal an election?

If it is, it is the first in history.

We cannot claim that these elections will be the most honest and upright in all recorded history. But I have a strong feeling that they are going to be better--more honest--and certainly more carefully watched--than most of us have any right to expect.

Our only intervention in this process has been to stand up openly for honest and fair elections. We have stated our position publicly. Our Ambassador in Saigon has time and time again reinforced this position in his talks with Vietnamese leaders.

Mr. President, the very fact that elections are being held before the eyes of the entire world is something of a miracle. It is also a mark of the progress that is being made in Vietnamese life.

And it is just this kind of progress that we have hoped for--prayed for -- and fought for. It is the kind of progress we should now welcome with open arms and happy hearts.

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