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FROM WALT ROSTOW
TO THE PRESIDENT
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By , NARA, Date 12-15-94

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BUNKER'S ACCOUNT OF THE CONVERSATION WITH THIEU WHICH ACCOMPANIED THE DELIVERY OF YOUR LETTER WILL INTEREST YOU.

TEXT OF CABLE FROM AMB BUNKER (SAIGON 5550)

1. WHEN TRANSMITTING THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER TO THIEU LAST EVENING, I HAD OCCASION FOR AN HOUR'S TALK WITH HIM. HE WAS IN RELAXED, EASY MOOD AND EXPRESSED HIS APPRECIATION OF THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE. I NOTICED THAT WHEN HE READ THE THIRD PARAGRAPH, WHICH REFERRED TO THE CREATION OF A BROADLY BASED GOVERNMENT, HE HESITATED AND I SENSED A SLIGHT SENSITIVITY ON HIS PART. (IT WILL BE RECALLED THAT I HAD MENTIONED TO HIM ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS THE IMPORTANCE OF BROADENING THE BASE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND ENDEAVORING TO INCLUDE SOME OF THE OPPOSITION AND WHEN GENERAL LANSDALE ASKED HIM THE DAY BEFORE THE ELECTION ABOUT THE COMPOSITION OF HIS GOVERNMENT HE LAUGHED AND SAID "GO AHEAD AND GIVE ME A LECTURE ABOUT A BROADLY BASED GOVERNMENT. THIS IS WHAT THE AMERICANS TALK TO ME ABOUT.") AFTER A MOMENT'S HESITATION, HE SAID, "I THINK WE CAN RELEASE THE COMPLETE TEXT AND I WILL DO SO TOMORROW."

2. HE WAS APPARENTLY PLEASED WITH HIS APPEARANCE YESTERDAY MORNING ON "MEET THE PRESS". HOWEVER, WHEN I REMARKED THAT I UNDERSTOOD IT HAD BEEN ARRANGED THAT HE AND KY WERE TO APPEAR TOGETHER, HE REPLIED THAT IT WAS NOT CUSTOMARY NOR TRADITIONAL THAT ANYONE SHOULD APPEAR ON SUCH A PROGRAM WITH THE CHIEF OF STATE. CONSEQUENTLY, IT WAS AGREED THAT HE SHOULD APPEAR ALONE. (COMMENT: KY'S ABSENCE FROM HIS SLATED APPEARANCE HAD BEEN THE SOURCE OF RUMORS THAT THIS WAS ANOTHER INDICATION THAT RELATIONS BETWEEN THEM ARE NOT GOING WELL). HE SAID THAT THE QUESTIONS PUT TO HIM BY THE PANEL HAD BEEN EASIER THAN THOSE WHICH ZORTHIAN AND I HAD TRANSMITTED TO HIM AND KY ON THURSDAY.

3. I ASKED WHETHER HE WAS MAKING PROGRESS IN PUTTING THE GOVERNMENT TOGETHER, AND HE SAID THAT IT WAS STILL IN THE FORMATIVE STAGE WITH A NUMBER OF ASSIGNMENTS STILL OPEN.

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4. WITH REGARD TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S POST, HE WAS INCREASINGLY OF THE VIEW THAT DR. NGUYEN LUU VIEN HAD THE MOST DESIRABLE QUALIFICATIONS. HE WAS A SOUTHERNER, WHICH WAS ESSENTIAL, WAS HONEST, HIGHLY RESPECTED, AND COMPETENT. THIEU BELIEVED THAT VIEN WOULD HAVE HUONG'S SUPPORT, IN FACT THAT HUONG WOULD PREFER HIM TO SOME OF THE YOUNGER MEN WHO HAD BEEN HIS SUPPORTERS. THIEU SAID THAT KY WAS STILL IN FAVOR OF LOC, BUT THAT WHILE LOC WAS INTELLIGENT, HE HAD NEITHER THE COMPETENCE NOR THE PRESTIGE FOR THE POST. I GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT THIEU HAD PRETTY WELL MADE UP HIS MIND ON VIEN.

5. HE THEN ASKED MY OPINION OF TRAN VAN DO IN THE FOREIGN MINISTRY. I REPLIED THAT WE HAD HIGH REGARD FOR DR. DO'S PERFORMANCE AS FOREIGN MINISTER, THAT WE FELT THAT HE HAD REPRESENTED VIET-NAM ABROAD WITH CONSIDERABLE DISTINCTION, AND WE WOULD LOOK WITH FAVOR ON HIS CONTINUING IN THIS POST. THIEU AGREED WITH THIS ESTIMATE, BUT FELT THAT DO HAD BEEN WEAK IN ADMINISTRATION. NGUYEN HUU CHI, WHO HAD BEEN HIS DIRECTOR OF CABINET, RECENTLY ASSIGNED AS OBSERVER AT THE U.N., WAS A BUDDHIST AND HAD PLACED A NUMBER OF HIS BUDDHIST FRIENDS IN POSTS AROUND THE WORLD. HE THOUGHT THAT IF DO WERE TO CONTINUE IN THE POST, HE WOULD NEED A DEPUTY WHO WAS A GOOD ADMINISTRATOR AND WHO COULD HANDLE FOREIGN OFFICE PERSONNEL PROBLEMS.

6. I THEN SAID IF DR. VIEN WERE TO BE GIVEN THE PRIME MINISTER'S POST, I THOUGHT IT VERY IMPORTANT THAT GOVERNOR HANH SHOULD CONTINUE AS MINISTER OF NATIONAL ECONOMY AS WELL AS GOVERNOR OF THE NATIONAL BANK. I HAD HIGH REGARD FOR HIS ABILITY AND FELT THAT HE HAD TURNED IN AN EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE. WHILE I WAS AWARE THAT HANH HAD REPEATEDLY EXPRESSED A DESIRE TO CONFINE HIS ACTIVITIES TO THE BANK, I FELT THAT THIEU SHOULD PUT PRESSURE ON HIM TO CONTINUE AS MINISTER. THIEU AGREED AND SAID THAT HE WAS CONFIDENT THAT HANH COULD BE PERSUADED TO CONTINUE.

7. I SAID THAT I THOUGHT CONSIDERABLE IMPROVEMENT WAS NEEDED IN THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND CHIEU HOI AND THAT I UNDERSTOOD CHANGES WERE CONTEMPLATED. THIEU AGREED THAT THE MINISTRY WAS VERY WEAK AND IT HAD BEEN PLANNED (WHICH KY HAD PREVIOUSLY REPORTED TO US) TO ASSIGN GENERAL TRI TO II CORPS AND HAVE GENERAL VINH LOC TAKE OVER THE MINISTRY. VINH LOC, HOWEVER WAS DISINCLINED TO TAKE THE POST AND THEY WERE, THEREFORE, LOOKING FOR SOMEONE ELSE. THIEU EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT THE MINISTER OF CHIEU HOI SHOULD BE A SOUTHERNER WHO SPEAKS THE LANGUAGE OF THE VIET CONG. HE FELT THAT THIS WAS PSYCHOLOGICALLY IMPORTANT IN PROPAGANDA ADDRESSED TO THE VIET CONG AND IN PERSUADING THEM TO RALLY. I SUGGESTED TO HIM THAT AMBASSADOR BUI DIEM MIGHT MAKE A COMPETENT MINISTER OF INFORMATION. HE SAID THAT THIS HAD NOT OCCURRED TO HIM, BUT HE WOULD GIVE THE SUGGESTION CONSIDERATION AND THAT IT MIGHT BE WELL TO SPLIT

THE TWO MINISTRIES. HE HAD THOUGHT THAT DR. PHAN QUANG DAN, SUU'S VICE PRESIDENTIAL RUNNING MATE, MIGHT MAKE A GOOD MINISTER OF CHIEU HOI BUT HE HAD THE DISADVANTAGE OF NOT BEING A SOUTHERNER. I SAID I THOUGHT HE MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER DR. DAN INSTEAD FOR THE POST OF MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE SINCE DAN HAD EXPRESSED A GREAT DEAL OF INTEREST IN LAND REFORM DURING THE CAMPAIGN AND SEEMED TO HAVE SOME CONSTRUCTIVE IDEAS ABOUT IT. THIEU SAID THAT HE THOUGHT THIS WAS AN INTERESTING SUGGESTION AND THAT HE WOULD CERTAINLY GIVE IT CONSIDERATION.

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8. I ASKED HIM WHETHER HE HAD MADE PROGRESS IN APPROACHING THE OPPOSITION AND HE SAID HE WAS MAKING APPROACHES TO SOME OF THEM THROUGH THIRD PARTIES. HE INTENDED TO OFFER HUONG A POST IN THE GOVERNMENT. HE DID NOT HOWEVER THINK HUONG WOULD BE SATISFACTORY AS PRIME MINISTER FROM THE POINT OF VIEW EITHER OF HIS HEALTH OR AS A GOOD WORKING MEMBER OF THE TEAM. HUONG WAS VERY POSITIVE IN HIS VIEWS, STUBBORN IN HOLDING TO THEM, AND NOT GOOD AT COOPERATING WITH OTHERS. HE SAID AGAIN THAT HE FELT SURE HUONG WOULD SUPPORT VIEN, WHOM HE LIKED AND RESPECTED, FOR THE POST OF PRIME MINISTER. THIEU ALSO EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT HA THUC KY WOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT TO WORK WITH. HE WAS AMBITIOUS, DIFFICULT, AND NOT A GOOD TEAM WORKER. THIEU SAID HE PLANNED TO SOUND OUT SUU ON SOME POST IN THE GOVERNMENT ALTHOUGH HE FELT THAT THIS WOULD HAVE TO BE PRETTY MUCH IN AN HONORARY CAPACITY BECAUSE OF SUU'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL CONDITION. HE FELT, HOWEVER, THAT AMONG THE SUPPORTERS OF HUONG, SUU, AND HA THUC KY, THERE WERE REPRESENTATIVES WHOM THEY MIGHT SUGGEST FOR GOVERNMENT POSTS AND WHO COULD BE INCLUDED.

9. I ASKED THIEU HOW HE ENVISAGED HIS WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH KY. HE SAID IF THEY HAD A STRONG PRIME MINISTER HE AND KY TOGETHER WOULD BE LARGELY CONCERNED WITH POLICY, WITH THE WAR EFFORT, WITH PACIFICATION, AND ESPECIALLY WITH THE BIG JOB OF REORGANIZATION OF THE ADMINISTRATION. THIS NEEDED A THOROUGH GOING OVER, INCLUDING THE REORGANIZATION OF THE ROLE OF PROVINCE CHIEFS AND THE SELECTION OF MANY NEW CHIEFS. HE FELT THAT THE POST OF PROVINCE CHIEF SHOULD NOT BE CONFINED TO THE MILITARY, BUT THAT COMPETENT CIVILIANS ALSO SHOULD BE APPOINTED TO THE POST. THE POST OF PROVINCE CHIEF WAS A VITALLY IMPORTANT ONE, ESPECIALLY IN PACIFICATION, AND GREAT CARE SHOULD BE TAKEN IN SELECTING THEM. THIEU SAID HE THOUGHT THE WHOLE ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION SHOULD BE REVAMPED AND STREAMLINED AND THAT THIS WOULD BE A TREMENDOUS UNDERTAKING. HE SAID THAT HE ALSO WANTED TO FORM AN ADVISORY GROUP OR BRAIN-TRUST TO ADVISE HIM AND KY ON MATTERS OF POLICY AND ORGANIZATION. HE WANTED TO INCLUDE IN THIS GROUP PEOPLE WHO KNEW MEMBERS OF THE NORTH VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT COPY LBJ LIBRARY

COULD DEAL WITH THEM, AND WITH WHOM HANOI AND NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT WOULD BE WILLING TO DEAL. HE FELT THAT THERE WERE A NUMBER OF SUCH OLDER, COMPETENT MEN WHO HAD FORMERLY BEEN ON GOOD TERMS WITH MEMBERS OF THE HANOI GOVERNMENT AND THE NLF, AND WITH WHOM THE LATTER WOULD DEAL WHEREAS THEY WOULD NOT WITH SOME OF THE YOUNGER TURKS.

13. I ASKED THIEU HOW HE VIEWED THE CHARGES OF THE OPPOSITION AND THEIR DEMAND FOR INVALIDATION OF THE ELECTIONS. HE SEEMED QUITE RELAXED ABOUT IT. HE SAID HE THOUGHT THAT THEY WOULD EVENTUALLY COOL OFF. HE THOUGHT THE COMPLAINTS THEY HAD FILED WERE RATHER UNSUBSTANTIAL AND THAT NONE OF THEM WOULD STAND UP BEFORE THE CENTRAL ELECTION COUNCIL OR THE COURTS. HE POINTED OUT THAT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO LEADING CANDIDATES WAS 800,000 VOTES AND FRAUD IN GREATER THAN THAT AMOUNT WOULD HAVE TO BE PROVED BEFORE NEW ELECTIONS COULD BE ORDERED. I ASKED HIM HIS VIEW OF WHAT HAD ACCOUNTED FOR DZU'S LARGE VOTE AND HE SAID HE THOUGHT FOUR ELEMENTS WERE INVOLVED. DZU WAS ARTICULATE AND A GOOD SPEAKER AND HIS CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT HAD GAINED VOTES FROM THOSE WHO WERE OPPOSED TO THE GOVERNMENT, HIS EMPHASIS ON PEACE ALSO HAD BEEN EFFECTIVE, A LARGE AMOUNT OF MONEY HAD BEEN EXPENDED FOR HIS CAMPAIGN FROM SOURCES WHICH THIEU DID NOT KNOW, BUT RUMORS HAD VARIOUSLY ATTRIBUTED TO THE CIA, THE FRENCH, DOVES IN THE UNITED STATES, AND THE VIET CONG. THE FOURTH ELEMENT WAS SUPPORT OF THE VIET CONG AND THERE APPEARED TO BE DEFINITE EVIDENCE NOT ONLY THAT DZU RAN STRONGEST IN PROVINCES WHERE THE VIET CONG WAS MOST INFLUENTIAL, BUT ALSO THAT IN SOME AREAS THE VIET CONG HAD ORDERED THE VOTERS TO BRING BACK OTHER BALLOTS AS PROOF THAT THEY HAD VOTED FOR DZU.

11. I SUGGESTED TO THIEU THAT IT MIGHT BE WORTHWHILE TO CALL IN THE OPPOSITION CANDIDATES TO TALK OVER THE SITUATION WITH THEM. IT SEEMED TO ME THERE WERE TWO CONSTRUCTIVE COURSES HE MIGHT FOLLOW: SUGGEST THAT THEY AGREE TO PULL TOGETHER WITH THE GOVERNMENT TO BACK THE WAR EFFORT AND PERHAPS FORM A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION, OR THEY MIGHT CONSTITUTE THEMSELVES A LOYAL OPPOSITION, ASSISTING THE NATIONAL EFFORT THROUGH CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISMS. BECAUSE OF THE DESPARATE ELEMENTS IN THE OPPOSITION, THIEU FELT IT MIGHT BE DIFFICULT TO FORM A COHESIVE WORKING TEAM, BUT AGAIN SAID THAT HE WAS IN TOUCH WITH THEM THROUGH THIRD PARTIES.

12. THIEU INFORMED ME THAT THERE WOULD BE AN IMPORTANT MEETING OF THE GENERALS ON SEPTEMBER 9, IN WHICH HE AND KY WOULD TAKE PART. (COMMENT: ALTHOUGH THIEU DID NOT VOLUNTEER FURTHER INFORMATION I JUDGE THAT THE MEETING MAY CONSIDER MATTERS RELATED TO THE FORMATION OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THUS HAVE A BEARING ON THE THIEU-KY RELATIONSHIP.)

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