

~~TOP SECRET/PENNSYLVANIA~~

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E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4

NLJ 94-453

By CL, NARA, Date 4-11-95

Tuesday, October 24, 1967
4:00 p.m.

Mr. President:

Herewith, with his usual lucidity,
Amb. Bunker handles Thieu on his
inaugural formula on negotiations and
a pause.

Thieu accepts the idea of no pause
without a prior understanding along
San Antonio lines.

W. W. Rostow

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Tuesday
October 24, 1967

DECLASSIFIED

E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4

NIJ 94-450

By ig, NARA, Date 7-21-95

FOR THE SECRETARY FROM BUNKER (Saigon, 9433)

I saw General Thieu at 9:00 a.m. on October 24 to discuss further efforts in the direction of negotiations and a peaceful settlement. I spoke to him along the following lines:

"My authorities in Washington have expressed their appreciation for the information you furnished me last week about a possible message to Ho Chi Minh following your inauguration. We agree fully with your view that it would be advisable to avoid the kind of message that would either be read in Hanoi as an ultimatum or elsewhere in the world as purely a propaganda move. We believe that serious peace initiatives by the newly elected government in Vietnam can be an important contribution to the allied position directed toward peace, and we are therefore gratified that you are giving serious thought to how your campaign pledges can be pursued and a more flexible position on the peace issue developed.

"We consider that it is vital for us to continue our close consultations on this subject. As our consultations proceed, we hope that you will limit the discussion of this important matter to the smallest possible circle of trusted advisors. We will do the same. I would appreciate knowing the persons with whom you will normally be discussing these subjects, and assume that General Ky and Foreign Minister Do will be among them. On my side, Ambassador Locke and Mr. Calhoun will be kept informed by me.

"You may have seen the recent article filed by Wilfred Burchett from Hanoi, but I have brought with me a copy of the full text in case you have not. This article seems to us an important public indicator of Hanoi's position. A North Vietnamese representative in another capital told a third-country diplomat only a few days before its publication to watch closely for it. We therefore believe it has special significance and clear authority from Hanoi. As we interpret the article, it represents a clear rejection of any possibility for cessation of the bombing except on the original terms of the January 28 interview between Foreign Minister Trinh and Burchett. These terms provided that the bombing should be stopped permanently with only vague possibility of talks and with no indication of military restraint on Hanoi's part. This new article clearly conveys the present hard mood of the leaders in Hanoi.

"For your personal information, you should know that reliable third-country intermediaries have been in contact with Hanoi during the past six weeks using the

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kind of formula expressed by Ambassador Goldberg and President Johnson and including also the possibility of a lesser reduction in hostilities combined with preliminary contacts. These efforts reached a clearly negative conclusion at the same time as the Burchett article was published, with the Hanoi representative finally indicating an unwillingness even to talk further with the intermediaries. This private contact has completely confirmed our impression of a clearly negative position on the part of Hanoi toward any acceptable formula for stopping the bombing and probably more broadly toward any avenue to peace at the present time.

"We have been considering the alternatives mentioned by you last week in the light of these developments. We believe that your first alternative should be the only one used at this time. Our understanding of this alternative is that you would limit yourself to general statements on peace in your inaugural address and would confine your message to Ho Chi Minh to an expression of desire for a peaceful settlement and for direct discussions to achieve that end. If this produced a favorable response, you would then ask us to halt the bombing and we would assume that reciprocal action would be forthcoming from the other side. Since we believe the Burchett article will be read in a negative sense by most responsible opinion throughout the world, we believe that an offer to Ho along the lines of your second alternative, a halt in the bombing to be followed promptly by a message to Ho proposing immediate talks, would be widely regarded as only a propaganda gesture. We are sure that you would wish to avoid this reaction and we are furthermore inclined to believe that such a message in present circumstances might well be interpreted in Hanoi as a sign of weakness. In considering the alternative courses which you suggested, we have concluded that the first alternative would put your government in a favorable light internationally as well as within Vietnam, since it would highlight the contrast between Hanoi's intransigence and Saigon's reasonableness.

"My authorities in Washington would like to know immediately your reactions to these comments and your own plans for handling this important matter. We are considering what further action might be taken in this situation and would of course want to take your views into account in determining them. I plan also to talk with General Ky about this matter in the very near future."

Thieu said he agreed entirely that the first alternative proposed by him in our conversation October 18 was preferable. He said he plans to speak in general terms in his inaugural address October 31, expressing a desire for peaceful settlement, his readiness to talk with Hanoi leaders and to keep the door open. If there is a favorable response and indication of Hanoi's willingness to take reciprocal action, then he would seek a bombing pause.

Thieu said he would like our advice on a number of aspects of his course of action. Following his inaugural address he would plan to send a letter to Ho appealing to the latter's conscience, stating that the Vietnamese people have suffered for many years from war and it is in the interest of all of the Vietnamese people that the two of them should meet and talk about what might be done to end hostilities. Thieu added that the letter would be couched in terms which would not be construed as either an ultimatum or as escalation. He said he would make clear that as far as he is concerned the doors will remain open.

Thieu said several questions arise. First is the method of transmission of the letter. He saw several possibilities: (1) to send it through the ICC; (2) to have it transmitted through Prime Minister Sato who had offered his assistance during his October 21 visit; (3) to use the Government of Vietnam's own channels through North Vietnamese representatives in other capitals. Thieu wondered whether other personalities might be of assistance or be better than one of the foregoing channels. He seemed to have no strong preference among them, and would like to have our advice.

A second question related to how and when other countries should be informed of this communication. Thieu anticipated Ho would reject this letter and move to exploit it publicly as propaganda to strengthen the morale of North Vietnamese forces and population. From his own viewpoint, Thieu thought its principal value would be to establish publicly the new Government's desire for peace and its flexibility in achieving this aim. Thieu seemed to have no pronounced preference for public release by the Government or awaiting publication by Ho, and he wished our views.

Thieu agreed entirely that knowledge of these matters would be restricted very closely on both sides. He seemed to agree that Prime Minister Ky and Foreign Minister Do should be involved on the Government side, although he was not explicit on whom he would consult.

Comment: I plan to talk with Prime Minister Ky later today on this subject and will report any views he may have. It seems to me that Thieu's ideas are very much in line with our own and I would appreciate early instructions from the Department on the points on which Thieu asked our advice.

The general tenor of Thieu's letter sounds eminently reasonable and I shall attempt to get a copy of his draft as soon as he has one worked out. On the matter of channels for transmitting the letter to Ho, I do not see any overriding considerations arguing for one means or another. I am inclined to see some

advantage in having it done through the Government's own channels direct to North Vietnamese representatives in a third country, since this would be consistent with our own earlier direct contact with North Vietnamese representatives and would be a logical way to try and open a dialogue. It does of course invite a refusal to accept such a letter but this would probably be true no matter what channel is used.

I agree with Thieu that in the present Hanoi mood, Ho Chi Minh will probably reject the letter and seek to exploit it for his own internal purposes. It would seem advantageous for Thieu to leave publication to Ho's initiative since this would underline the sincerity of his approach and not make it look like a propaganda gesture. If Ho does not release it over a period of time, however, it may be necessary for Thieu to make a public move since the press is fully aware of his plans and will be pressing him to see whether he has sent such a communication.

For this reason, I think it would be best to keep open the possibility that after a certain lapse of time, Thieu would indicate publicly that he has sent such a letter, and ultimately would release its text if he has not had a reaction from Hanoi which would argue otherwise.

Department will be the best judge of what other countries, if any, should be kept informed at this stage, and whether there are other possible channels for transmitting Thieu's letter which might be better than those suggested by him.