

~~SECRET~~/BUTTERCUP/SENSITIVE

Monday, November 6, 1967 -- 7:45 a. m.

Mr. President:

This is a summary of the attached.

Thieu, on being fully briefed, reacted positively but with caution and sensitivity to the political dangers.

He feels the National Liberation Front is "not serious" in their stated willingness to move on to "establishing the basis for resolving greater matters" after working out the prisoner exchange, but also feels that it is too important a possibility to ignore and, therefore, there is an overriding consideration for us to "test" their sincerity by our making the next move and observing their response to it." Thieu designated General Loan as his action officer on the prisoner of war aspects of the case, but reserved specifically to himself the substantive political aspects of the case. Thieu believes that we should not initially release too many of the prisoners held by our side, in order to retain some bargaining power for later stages of discussion with the NLF, and should also consider specifying exactly which U. S. or Vietnamese prisoners we would like the NLF to release. Thieu stressed that it could be an extremely serious political problem to the Government of Vietnam if the NLF, after releasing some American prisoners, were to propagandize that the release was a result of United States Government liaison with the National Liberation Front as a political entity, and that precautions should be taken to insure secrecy of this undertaking on prisoner exchange.

W. W. Rostow

Saigon 499

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TO THE WHITE HOUSE, EXCLUSIVE FOR MR ROSTOW  
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1. SUMMARY: [REDACTED] MET WITH PRESIDENT THIEU LATE AFTERNOON 5 NOVEMBER FOR DETAILED DISCUSSION OF [REDACTED] FOLLOWING AMBASSADOR BUNKER'S TALK WITH THIEU ON SAME GENERAL SUBJECT ON 4 NOVEMBER. [REDACTED] REVIEWED THE HISTORY OF THE CASE FOR THIEU, AND SUMMARIZED WHAT THE NLF HAS REQUESTED AS CONDITIONS PRECEDENT TO POSSIBLE FURTHER STEPS BY THE NLF. THIEU STATED THAT HE FEELS WE MUST RESPOND TO THIS OVERTURE FROM THE NLF, BUT SHOULD PROCEED CAUTIOUSLY AND NOT OVER-REACT TO THE NLF MESSAGE. THIEU COMMENTED THAT HE FEELS NLF IS "NOT SERIOUS" IN THEIR STATED WILLINGNESS TO MOVE ON TO "ESTABLISHING THE BASIS FOR RESOLVING GRATER MATTERS" AFTER WORKING OUT THE PRISONER EXCHANGE, BUT ALSO FEELS THAT IT IS TOO

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b(1) IMPORTANT POSSIBILITY TO IGNORE AND THEREFORE THERE IS AN OVERALL CONSIDERATION FOR US TO "TEST" THEIR SINCERITY BY OUR MAKING THE NEXT MOVE AND OBSERVING THEIR RESPONSE TO IT. THIEU DESIGNATED GENERAL LOAN AS HIS ACTION OFFICER ON THE POW ASPECTS OF THE CASE, APPROVED [REDACTED] BRIEFING LOAN ON THE 19 OCTOBER MESSAGE [REDACTED] AND WORKING JOINTLY WITH LOAN TO ASCERTAIN THE BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND IMPORTANCE OF EACH PRISONER THE NLF HAS ASKED BE RELEASED, BUT RESERVED SPECIFICALLY TO HIMSELF THE SUBSTANTIVE POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE CASE. THIEU BELIEVES THAT WE SHOULD NOT INITIALLY RELEASE TOO MANY OF THE PRISONERS HELD BY OUR SIDE IN ORDER TO RETAIN SOME BARGAINING POWER FOR LATER STAGES OF DISCUSSION WITH THE NLF, AND SHOULD ALSO CONSIDER SPECIFYING EXACTLY WHICH U.S. OR VIETNAMESE PRISONERS WE WOULD LIKE THE NLF TO RELEASE. THIEU STRESSED THAT IT COULD BE AN EXTREMELY SERIOUS POLITICAL PROBLEM TO THE GVN IF THE NLF, AFTER RELEASING SOME AMERICAN PRISONERS, WERE TO PROPAGANDIZE THAT THE RELEASE WAS A RESULT OF UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT LIAISON WITH THE NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT AS A POLITICAL ENTITY, AND THAT PRECAUTIONS SHOULD BE TAKEN TO INSURE SECRECY OF THIS UNDERTAKING ON PRISONER EXCHANGE.

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b(1) 2. [REDACTED] BEGAN THE SESSION WITH THIEU BY REVIEWING THE GENERAL BACKGROUND [REDACTED] BEGINNING WITH THE ARREST [REDACTED] AND THE MESSAGE [REDACTED] CARRIED

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b(1) OUR REPLY MESSAGE [REDACTED] AND FINALLY THE LATTER'S 19 OCTOBER RETURN MESSAGE TO US. THIEU ASKED FOR AND WAS GIVEN A RUNDOWN ON WHAT EXACTLY THE NLF HAS ASKED OUR SIDE TO DO AND WAS TOLD THEY WANT: (A) RELEASE OF [REDACTED] AND GUARANTEE OF [REDACTED] SAFE RETURN TO THE VC ZONE. (B) RELEASE OF THE OTHERS ARRESTED [REDACTED] (C) GOOD TREATMENT FOR PRISONERS HELD BY GVN MENTIONED IN [REDACTED] LATEST MESSAGE.

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b(1) 3. THIEU WAS THEN SHOWN AND READ OUR OUTGOING MESSAGE [REDACTED] (IN VIETNAMESE TEXT) AND [REDACTED] 19 OCTOBER REPLY (ALSO IN VIETNAMESE TEXT). [REDACTED] POINTED OUT TO THIEU THE REFERENCES IN THE 19 OCTOBER MESSAGE OF NLF WILLINGNESS TO MOVE ON TO "ESTABLISHING THE BASIS FOR RESOLVING GREATER MATTERS," AT WHICH POINT THIEU EXPRESSED HIS DOUBT THEY WOULD IN FACT BE WILLING TO DO SO AND LATER COMMENTED ON NLF STATEMENTS OF THE CERTAINTY OF U.S. DEFEAT IN VIETNAM AS EVIDENCE THEY WOULD NOT BE INTERESTED IN "CONTINUING ON TO OTHER, LARGER MATTERS" AFTER A PRISONER EXCHANGE. DURING AND AFTER READING THE 19 OCTOBER [REDACTED] MESSAGE THIEU REMARKED THAT NLF "CANNOT BE TRUSTED," THAT WE MUST BE WARY.

OF THEIR "TRAPS", THAT WE MUST CHECK CAREFULLY TO ASCERTAIN THE DEGREE OF IMPORTANCE TO THE NLF OF THE PRISONERS THEY ARE ASKING TO BE RELEASED, AND SPECULATED ON WHAT GUARANTEE WE WOULD HAVE THAT THE NLF WOULD RELEASE ANY U.S. OR VIETNAMESE PRISONERS IN RESPONSE TO OUR NEXT MOVE. THIEU CONCLUDED THAT ALTHOUGH HE DOUBTS THE NLF ARE "SERIOUS" ABOUT ANYTHING BROADER THAN A PRISONER EXCHANGE FROM WHICH THEY WOULD HOPE TO GAIN THE NET BENEFIT, IT IS NONTHELESS TOO IMPORTANT A MATTER NOT TO "TEST" THE NLF BY OUR TAKING AN APPROPRIATE STEP FORWARD ON THE PRISONER EXCHANGE ASPECT. THIEU COMMENTED THAT WE SHOULD BE CAREFUL NOT TO RELEASE ALL OF THEIR IMPORTANT (TO THEM) PRISONERS AT THE OUTSET AND LEAVE US NO MATERIAL TO BARGAIN WITH LATER, PARTICULARLY UNTIL WE OBSERVE THE RECIPROCAL ACTION THE NLF TAKES IN ACTUALLY RELEASING OR NOT RELEASING U.S. AND VIETNAMESE PRISONERS. AT THIS POINT THIEU SUGGESTED THAT WE SHOULD SPECIFY WHICH PRISONERS WE WANT THEM TO RELEASE IN RETURN FOR OUR TAKING THE ACTION THEY HAVE REQUESTED ON VIET CONG PRISONERS.

4. THIEU STRESSED THE GRAVITY OF THE PROBLEM FOR THE GVN IF THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE WERE TO BECOME AWARE OF A LIAISON BETWEEN THE USG AND THE NLF, AND COMMENTED ON THE POSSIBILITY OF THE NLF RELEASING A NUMBER OF AMERICAN PRISONERS AND THEN PROPAGANDIZING THAT THEIR RELEASE WAS A RESULT OF U.S.G. LIAISON WITH THE NATIONAL FRONT AS A POLITICAL ENTITY. IN ANSWER TO THEIU'S QUERY ON HOW TO INSURE MAXIMUM SECRECY OF THIS UNDERTAKING, [REDACTED] INDICATED THAT WE WERE PLANNING TO SUGGEST THAT PRISONERS NOW HELD BY GVN BE RELEASED UNDER THE GVN 1 NOVEMBER GENERAL AMNESTY FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS WITH NO AMERICAN HAND SHOWING, AND THAT IN THE CASE OF [REDACTED] AND ANY OTHERS WE MIGHT DECIDE TO RELEASE WHO WOULD GO BACK TO THE VC ZONE, THEY WOULD BE PRINCIPALLY CONCERNED WITH GETTING BACK TO THE ZONE AND SHOULD BE NO PROBLEM IN THIS REGARD. THE POINT WAS ALSO MADE THAT THE NLF COULD, IN ANY CASE AND WITHOUT REGARD TO OUR PRESENT LINK WITH THEM, SIMPLY RELEASE SOME AMERICAN PRISONERS AND THEN FALSELY CLAIM THEIR RELEASE WAS A RESULT

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