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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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By sig, NARA, Date 4-6-95

WWRostow:rla

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FM AMB BUNKER SAIGON 499  
TO THE WHITE HOUSE, EXCLUSIVE FOR MR ROSTOW  
SECSTATE, EXCLUSIVE FOR SECRETARY RUSK  
SECDEF, EXCLUSIVE FOR SECRETARY MCNAMARA  
DIRECTOR CIA, EXCLUSIVE FOR MR. HELMS

1. SUMMARY: [REDACTED] MET WITH PRESIDENT THIEU LATE  
AFTERNOON 5 NOVEMBER FOR DETAILED DISCUSSION OF [REDACTED]  
[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 THE S  
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 GR EATER 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 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.

2. [REDACTED] BEGAN THE SESSION WITH THIEU BY REVIEWING  
THE GENERAL BACKGROUND [REDACTED] BEGINNING WITH THE  
ARREST [REDACTED] AND THE MESSAGE [REDACTED] CARRIED  
[REDACTED] 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]  
[REDACTED] (C) GOOD TREATMENT FOR PRISONERS  
HELD BY GVN MENTIONED IN [REDACTED] LATEST MESSAGE.

3. THIEU WAS THEN SHOWN AND READ OUR OUTGOING MESSAGE [REDACTED]  
[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 NONETHELESS 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 THIEU'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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