

FILE	SUBJ.
DATE	SUB-CAT.

3169

LAIRD-THIEU MEETING -- March 1969, Saigon

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Participants:

RVN

His Excellency Nguyen Van Thieu  
President of the Republic of Viet-Nam  
His Excellency Nguyen Cao Ky  
Vice President  
His Excellency Tran Chanh Thanh  
Minister of Foreign Affairs  
General Cao Van Vien  
Chief of Joint General Staffs  
Mr. Nguyen Phu Duc  
Special Assistant to the President

US

The Honorable Melvin R. Laird  
Secretary of Defense  
The Honorable Ellsworth Bunker  
Ambassador  
General Earle G. Wheeler  
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff  
The Honorable G. Warren Muttter  
Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA)  
The Honorable Robert Froehlke  
Assistant Secretary of Defense (A)  
General Creighton W. Abrams  
COMUSMACV  
The Honorable Samuel D. Berger  
Deputy Ambassador

Time/Place: Independence Palace, Saigon  
March 8, 1969 - 11:30 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Subject: Meeting of Secretary of Defense with President Thieu

1. After some social exchange, Secretary Laird said that President Nixon wished him to visit South Viet-Nam at this time both in connection with his new duties as Secretary of Defense, and in preparation for his appearance before Congress on the defense budget and military assistance program for 1970. The new administration has some time, which the last administration did not have, to work out matters with the South Vietnamese government in order to achieve our common objectives. He had, therefore, to have a full understanding of the situation and what the needs would be in the future. President Thieu replied by asking how the Secretary saw the situation in the United States.

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2. Secretary Laird said when the new administration took over it was quite clear that time had run out on the last administration in terms of public support for our Viet-Nam policy. Since the changeover, the American people and Congress have shown a willingness to give President Nixon time to see what can be done to bring the conflict to an end, along with achieving our objectives. There is not the same amount of pressure now that there was toward the end of last year, and the new administration has some time -- perhaps six months or twelve -- he cannot say exactly. The most immediate problems were the modernization and improvement of the Vietnamese forces and the assumption by Viet-Nam of a greater share of responsibility for the fighting. The reduction of American troops should be based on the improvement of the Vietnamese fighting forces and the military requirements. It is important that numbers be avoided in statements about American reductions until after the necessary studies have been made. He could tell the President, in confidence, that when he appears before Congress in March, he will ask for additional funds for Phase II...to accelerate the modernization and equipment of the Vietnamese forces.

3. President Thieu said he would like to clarify the Vietnamese view of this matter. He knows that South Viet-Nam has given American administrations and the American people many problems. He wants to alleviate these and reduce the burden on the United States. This can only be done under certain conditions. There is as yet no sign from the other side that they wish to de-escalate the war. This means the fighting will go on. To reduce the burden on the United States, the Vietnamese armed forces must be better trained and equipped so as to enable the United States gradually to reduce the size of its forces here. He asked for full support of the United States to achieve this.

4. Secretary Laird asked President Thieu to comment on the effect of the shelling of the cities on the people and on the government. President Thieu replied with a long statement, the highlights of which were:

a. The communists hoped in February to initiate another Tet offensive such as occurred last year, but they were unable to achieve this. First, we were too well prepared. Second, they were unable to coordinate the shelling with the spear-headed units moving into the cities, to be followed by ground attacks, all designed to produce a general uprising. They now have no hope of an uprising in the South.

b. The shelling is designed to give their troops confidence and build their morale for attacks; also to show the people in the North that they are doing something. They could not indefinitely sit in their bases and sanctuaries waiting for Paris to produce victory. This offensive is a sign of weakness, not strength.

c. The political aim of these shelling attacks was to impress the United States with their capability to mount another offensive and to show the Americans that Hanoi is not prepared to agree easily to the US terms for a withdrawal.

d. The shelling, further, is an attempt to make people believe there was no understanding with the United States in connection with the bombing cessation. It was to prove that the US had to call off the bombing because of its weak position in the eyes of public opinion, not because of any understandings.

e. They hope the shelling will demoralize the people and government in South Viet-Nam and create strains between the South Vietnamese and the United States. They want the GVN to ask the Americans to find a solution, and if the United States does not dare to retaliate, they expect this will create differences between the United States and the GVN. It is thus a test of President Nixon and the new administration. Everything now depends on how we respond both in Viet-Nam and in Paris.

f. The first rocketing had no effect, but as it goes on, people are beginning to ask what the United States will say in Paris, and what we will do. If there is no response, the South Vietnamese will conclude that the United States "does not have a strong attitude of support for the South. The communists will exploit this in their propaganda to try to convince people in South Viet-Nam that the US is moving toward a soft solution."

g. If the shelling continues and no response is made, diplomatically, politically, or militarily, it would have very bad effects here. President Nixon's statement at his press conference on this subject, and Secretary Laird's arrival statement have given great satisfaction here, but if the shelling continues with no response, people will begin to wonder.

h. He is not pushing to resume the bombing of the North.

"At least not now, for we must be wise and deliberate in our reaction. Each time there is a shelling, we must examine the situation together, and at some point we must decide what to do. General Vien and General Abrams should get together to study what kind of responses might be made."

5. President Thieu commented on the excellent relations which now exist with the United States. He understands perfectly well that President Nixon is not yet ready to make decisions and announcements as to what he will do in South Viet-Nam, but he hopes that this will be done after Secretary Laird returns. He hopes that the "wise actions" that he referred to in conjunction with retaliation will be taken in concert and will be discussed in advance between the two governments.

6. Secretary Laird commented favorably on the strong leadership which President Thieu had given the pacification program and the program to modernize the forces. He then asked how things were going on the building of a political base in order to compete with the communists after a settlement. He noted that President Thieu was getting around the country a great deal. Speaking as a former politician, he knew how important it was that President Thieu take time to do this.

7. President Thieu said that he was no politician, but the simple fact was that the GVN had to have a strong and broad political base if it was to fight the war, carry out the negotiations, and ultimately deal with the new situation that would arise when peace came. Viet-Nam, unfortunately, has more politicians than businessmen. There are many political parties and organizations, and politicians operate freely, but they do not operate together. Many have tried to bring them together with no success. He must now do this himself. He had, however, to move with some caution. People still have vivid memories of President Diem's political party -- the Can Lao. It was a strong party, composed of the military forces, government officials, politicians and the people. But that party led to dictatorship, and many people are fearful that another strong party would produce the same result. This was why he had to move with care, but he hoped to have good results by the end of the year. Everyone recognized that after a settlement, the Communists would operate in the free political life of South Viet-Nam and would constitute a danger. The genuine nationalists therefore had to come together to meet this threat.

8. Continuing on this same subject, President Thieu said while it is a fact that the nationalists are not well organized, what is also true is that the communists have no firm control over the people either. There is a vacuum here that has to be filled. One of his main objectives this year is to strengthen the GVN's political base at the local level. This means elections in the villages and hamlets, and good administration at that level. "We are confident that we can build this base in the countryside. It is more important than uniting the politicians in Saigon, because many of the politicians have no political following."

9. One of his main problems is the communists' deliberate campaign of assassination directed at anyone with leadership ability, from the top to the bottom. They are trying to exterminate every South Viet-Nam nationalist leader, following the same pattern as they did in 1945. This year is the decisive year for both sides. But the government is now in an advantageous position to win the support of the people and consolidate its political base. This is why he is training local officials in large numbers, and why he attaches so much importance to land reform. "I have called for a revolution in the countryside to win popular support."

10. Secretary Laird said that one problem in the United States is that over the years, the administration has made one optimistic report after another to Congress and the people. If those reports of progress had been true, the war should have been won long since. The new administration must be careful about its reports of progress, and its predictions, or it, too, will be discredited. It cannot give our Congress and our people the impression that success is just around the corner either in Paris or in Viet-Nam. It must present the situation as it really is, or the American people will soon come to disbelieve it as well.

11. President Thieu said that his government was proceeding very methodically. It has set out its objectives and now it must "capture" them one by one. One of the most important areas is the pacification of the countryside. The present communist offensive had, up to now, had little effect on the pacification program. It has not been set back and, indeed, is proceeding. If the communists cannot disrupt the pacification program with this offensive, then it will become obvious that there is no hope for them.

12. Secretary Laird asked the President if he would discuss the progress being made in the police forces. President Thieu replied in much the same vein as the Prime Minister in the earlier conversation. This year concentration is on establishing the police forces in the villages. It was here and in the hamlets that law and order and security had to be established, and civil administration improved. This was the job of the Defense and Interior Ministries. Many police and local officials were being trained for this work.

13. Secretary Laird said when he saw President Nixon on his return from Europe, the President said he was very pleased with his visit. He had made that trip for several reasons, and President Nixon wished President Thieu to understand that while he made his first visit abroad to Europe, it did not minimize in any way the importance he attaches to the problems in Asia, and here in Viet-Nam. Our position in Europe had deteriorated in several ways, and many questions were being asked by the Europeans. The cost of the war in South Viet-Nam has been a major portion of the American defense budget, and while we were engaged here the Soviet Union had been busy building up its military power. The Europeans were greatly concerned over American intentions.

14. President Thieu said he would like to confirm what Vice President Ky had told President Nixon. All Presidents have their priorities, and he understands the reasons why President Nixon went to Paris first. However, the leaders of Asia, and especially Southeast Asia, feel they must have an opportunity to talk with President Nixon before long. A meeting was needed not just on Viet-Nam, but on the future of Southeast

Asia. We have a common point of view with this administration on Viet-Nam, he said, but there is much uneasiness in the area, and other leaders have a psychological need for assurances about the future of American policy in this area. Secretary Laird said he would convey this message to the President, adding that President Nixon had many things to do at home in the immediate future and was not likely to move out of Washington very much in the next few months.

15. President Thieu asked when the next elections would be held in the United States. Secretary Laird said in the fall of 1970, but there would be an election in early April in the Secretary's district to fill his seat. It would be a very tough fight, but it might be an indication of the attitude of the American people toward the new administration.

16. The Secretary said that the communists seemed to have impressed many in the world that it is they who want peace, and it is our side which wants war. Has President Thieu any suggestions as to how our side might deal with this problem of convincing people that it is we who really want peace? President Thieu's reply was rather discursive. He said there is a problem here which he recognizes, but it is not easy to solve. We must stake our case on the defense of freedom. We must show we want peace, but not a false peace. We must show that it is the communists who are aggressors and it is they who make war. The peace which will come to Viet-Nam must not be a temporary peace. It must be a peace which is guaranteed by the free nations. The communists have one aim -- to get American power out of Southeast Asia. If that happens, then there will be no peace. We must therefore think of the long term. The communists may make concessions in Paris in order to have the Americans leave South Viet-Nam and the area, but when this war ends, the communists must know that the free world will come back if they invade again. The guarantee of peace in this part of the world is therefore very important. It must rest, in the first instance, on the nations in the area being strong, so that they can defend themselves, and also they must join together to help each other. But American power will always be essential. The problem is how to reduce further burdens on the United States, and this can only be done if each of the countries is made stronger to defend itself, and the countries unite for security.

17. President Thieu then asked Vice President Ky if he had any remarks. Ky said he had talked to many newsmen in Paris and it was clear they were tired of hearing the communists repeating their verions of history, the war, their demands, etc. This rigidity was doing the communists no good. They were losing press interest and support. On the other hand, South Viet-Nam had shown its good will and its desire to arrive at a peaceful conclusion to the war, and he believed the South Vietnamese government has gained some support in the press.

18. Ky then went on:

"As the negotiations progress, we must not be expected to continue to make concessions in order to make progress. We must show Hanoi that we have more determination than they. We must prove they cannot win by force. We must convince them they cannot ask us or expect us to surrender. American public opinion is very important to us, but if American public opinion demands that we make concession after concession, then we will lose in the negotiations, and the American sacrifice here will have been in vain. A cease-fire or a temporary solution cannot bring lasting peace.

"The trouble is that nations who are not involved, nations which know nothing about South Viet-Nam, speak loudly about peace, and stopping the war. But for the South Vietnamese the outcome of the negotiations is a matter of survival. The issue is fundamental: Hanoi must withdraw, then we can solve our internal problems by ourselves. If the United States forces us to make concessions, or to deal with the communists while the forces of Hanoi are still in the South, this will never be accepted by the South."

19. Ky said there were differences between the Vietnamese government and the last American administration, and these added to the confusion in Viet-Nam and the United States. Because of this confusion people began to question the validity of the American commitment or the value of continuing the fight. President Nixon asked him for mutual trust and understanding. He assured the President that South Viet-Nam would give him that trust and understanding. He had said the same thing to Harriman. If there was a solid foundation of trust between the two, we will succeed. If there is division between us, we will both lose this war.

"We in South Viet-Nam must take over a greater share of the burden of the war from the United States, but for that we must have help -- more military forces, more training, more and better equipment."

20. Ky remarked bitterly that the Soviet Union helps North Viet-Nam, but no one criticizes her. Why then this criticism of the United States? He blamed American newsmen. He ended up with an emotional appeal to put Viet-Nam in front:

"We do not ask you to bomb the North -- we will do it ourselves. There will be less criticism, or no criticism, if we bomb. Let our pilots be captured, nor yours. If the shelling continues, the Vietnamese Air Force should be turned loose, and if President

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Thieu orders me I will lead the attacks myself. We have that right. I am aware that the resumption of bombing creates problems for the United States, but if the cities continue to be shelled, we must retaliate. Otherwise what can we tell our people? If we do nothing our people will regard us as weak, there will be no progress in Paris, and people here will begin to say that the ultimate outcome will be a communist takeover in the negotiations."

21. Secretary Laird said that President Nixon has decided to go ahead with a supplemental budget in order to accelerate the training and equipment of the South Vietnamese forces so that they can take over more of the burden from the United States. We are prepared to move as rapidly as we can to turn over more and more of the fighting to South Viet-Nam.

22. After the conference concluded, President Thieu made a few further remarks to the Secretary and Ambassador Bunker, while they were waiting for lunch to be served.

a. He went over the ground of retaliation for the shelling, emphasizing that the response must be "correct, wise, and moderate." The communists were trying to put the GVN in a position of asking for a resumption of the bombing of the North. Perhaps, he speculated, a preferable course would be "one-for-one, a tooth-for-a-tooth. Each time they shell, we strike the North." Thieu had obviously not thought through all the implications of this tactic, for he said again that General Abrams and General Vien should talk about the problems and come up with suggestions.

b. On the enemy's strategy, he thought there would be a renewal of the current offensive any day. They had a capability to strike again for two or three weeks, and this time they might direct their aim at the pacification program. They would then pause, and the pattern would be repeated some time later. He thought this would probably go on through April or May, and by then if they were unsuccessful -- and he was confident they would fail -- they might be ready to move to substantive talks, possibly proposing a cease-fire at Paris.

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