

VICTIM - POL. & GOVT (2)

Press Interview
of
PRESIDENT
NGUYEN VAN THIEU

CENTER FOR SOUTH/SOUTHEAST ASIA STUDIES
University of California, Berkeley

Saigon, Vietnam
25 March 1969

Press Interview
of
PRESIDENT
NGUYEN VAN THIEU

25 March 1969

Question: How do you evaluate the current Communist offensive?

President Thieu: The Communists would like to apply very heavy pressure on the political side, at the talks, and to cause difficulty for President Nixon and us, to divide our two governments—the United States and the Vietnamese.

Certainly one of their main objectives is to show that they are strong and that we have to consider what they demand in Paris; that they are not ready to accept a reasonable solution, and will ask us to make more concessions.

Psychologically, it is in their interest to consolidate the morale of their troops. The shelling of the cities creates more noise than results. In a sense, by the shelling they are saying to their troops that there was no understanding between the United States and themselves when we ceased bombing. They are saying that the Americans were forced to stop bombing because they could not do any more—because they have lost too many planes and too many pilots.

Now their principal objective, I think, is to obtain the psychological advantage of placing us in the difficult position of deciding how to respond or even whether to respond at all. If the Vietnamese government asks the U.S. government to respond and if they don't, it will generate controversy between

us. And if the United States does respond, it may cause controversy in the States. The Communists are very clever in sowing contention among their opponents.

There is another point—militarily and from a morale standpoint, they are losing; they have shown that they are weaker than last year. They have shown that they are not capable of doing anything but launch sporadic attacks—not to have any decisive battles but to inflict heavy casualties on Vietnamese and American troops.

So when we discuss the situation, we have to make a comparison between what the Communists have gained and what they have lost. On the one hand they have employed the tactics of shelling and killing the civilian population in order to obtain a psychological effect. On the other hand, they have suffered increasing casualties on the battlefield and lost a great number of their men who have defected to us. Besides, their terrorist tactics are costing them support everywhere. So, when we take all these facts into consideration, we see that the Communists have lost more than they have gained in their attempt to obtain the main objective.

Question: Mr. President, has there been any difference between your thinking and the thinking of the Nixon Administration on how to respond to the shelling of South Vietnam cities? And what have you recommended? Bombing of the North?

President Thieu: At the moment (March 25, 1969) President Nixon is studying that problem with Ambassador Bunker and with his staff in Washington. I would not like to make any advance statement on that because we are working together on it. So I am sorry I cannot answer you as to how, and with what and when we should respond. But I think that militarily or diplomatically, there should be a response. Now, when you ask me directly about resuming the bombing, I can answer more clearly. When we ceased the

bombing we did so to have serious talks and to obtain peace as fast as possible. Now, if the Communists try to create a deadlock in the peace talks by escalating the war, we should adopt a new policy, because we would have less hope of ending the war by peace talks. I don't believe that this moment has come yet and I still believe that the Communists realize that they need to talk rather than fight. But if the day comes when we realize that there is no more hope of peace through talks and negotiations, we should adopt a new policy. If part of the new policy is to resume bombing, it will be a new kind of bombing—not the same as before. The same kind of bombing will not solve our problem.

Question: You would not recommend returning to the old form of bombing, but to something else?

President Thieu: I think so. We should solve the problem in another way, a more rational way than just to resume the same bombing.

Question: Mr. President, what would you consider to be an indication that there was hope in Paris or under what circumstances should it be concluded that there is no hope?

President Thieu: I said that I don't believe today that we can say we have no more hope. Also I am confident that the Communists realize that they must accept the talks. What they would like to do is to use time to play on the impatience of United States opinion. Now we have another light at the other end of the tunnel. That is the private talks. We hope that the private talks can bring something new.

Question: Mr. President, have the private talks already started?

President Thieu: I cannot tell you either

“yes” or “not yet” but, we are working on that very seriously.

Question: In Paris or in Saigon?

President Thieu: In Paris.

Question: Is there any National Liberation Front participation?

President Thieu: We don't know yet. But we are ready to have private talks with the NLF if they like. We are ready to talk to anyone in private talks or in secret talks.

Question: Is this a major change in your policy?

President Thieu: No. I don't think so. I think there are many things that we cannot discuss at the official conference table, but that we can discuss very frankly in private and secret talks.

Question: Mr. President, when you say that you are ready for private talks with the NLF, do you mean just Saigon and the NLF or do you mean that it has to be all four parties?

President Thieu: In private talks we do not know who would participate and what subject we would discuss.

Question: Would it be possible to have it among the two of you (South Vietnam and the NLF?)

President Thieu: Very possible.

Question: Has the first private meeting been scheduled yet?

President Thieu: Not yet. It has not yet been decided. We are working on it.

Question: Mr. President, do you have any

indication that the NLF at this time is ready for private meetings?

President Thieu: Nobody can guess the attitude of the Communists. We let them understand that we are ready. It is up to them.

Question: Then, what you have to say, Mr. President, is that if a representative of the National Liberation Front contacted a member of the South Vietnamese delegation in Paris you would then acquiesce to meet with them in Paris?

President Thieu: Yes. That is so.

Question: And that you have already communicated this willingness to them?

President Thieu: We are ready and Vice President Ky has said so publicly many times.

Question: Have you communicated any willingness through any other means than what Vice President has said publicly?

President Thieu: I think they understood even more than what Vice President Ky has said publicly.

Question: Then this has been conveyed to the NLF? The NLF recognizes this position?

President Thieu: I think so. I think that they understand that we are ready. And that we are waiting for them. They understand well.

Question: But they have not responded?

President Thieu: Not yet.

Question: Mr. President, what is your assessment of the American position in terms of public opinion and policy, particularly the Nixon Administration's policy?

President Thieu: Earlier we were more con-

cerned about the impatience of U.S. opinion. But from the time we had the new Paris meetings, U.S. opinion has shown greater understanding of our attitude and that of the Communists. U.S. opinion understood that we have made enough concessions to have real, substantive talks. I believe that U.S. opinion is less impatient than before. I think that U.S. opinion believes that the new President would like to end the war through negotiations, that President Nixon is not a superhawk who wants to continue the war and win by military means. I hope that U.S. opinion understands that our Government also would like to have a peaceful settlement of the war, that we are not warmongers. Such understanding would help world opinion and U.S. opinion to be more patient and to realize that if there is a deadlock it is not because of our attitude, but because of the Communists' stubbornness.

Question: Are you working more closely, in more harmony, with the Nixon Administration than you did with the Johnson Administration?

President Thieu: There is no difference—we still have the same close coordination and close cooperation.

Question: Mr. President. Are you satisfied with the results of the elections which just took place on the past three Sundays in the hamlets and villages in Vietnam?

President Thieu: I don't have the figures now, but in spite of the Communist offensive, we held the elections on schedule. The results are good.¹

1. On April 7, President Thieu reported that elections were held in an additional 589 villages and 3,031 hamlets, thus increasing the percentage of villages in which elections have been held to 76 percent and hamlets of 77 percent. Eighty-nine percent of the rural voters went to the polls.

Question: Mr. President, on what points and how far are you willing to accept some NLF presence in your government?

President Thieu: The NLF knows that we will never accept a Communist Party as such under our constitution and in our country—never a Communist Party as such. In order to have a political solution of the problem, all aggression and subversion must cease, and we must restore the situation as established by the Geneva Accords of '54 and '62. You may ask: "What kind of political solution?" Well, the NLF could become a Party and we could let them participate in the elections. I cannot tell you exactly what we can offer them right now. It depends on their attitude. But if the talks are serious in Paris we may discuss a political solution.

Question: Sir, you indicate that you cannot tell us what you can offer the NLF right now. Does this imply that under some circumstances you might be able to offer the NLF something in a future government, say some part in the future administration of South Vietnam?

President Thieu: I can tell you very clearly two things: No coalition government with the NLF and no Communist Party as such in Vietnam. Now what remains to be considered? They can participate in elections. They can dissolve and become another political party. Those are possible ways to meet the problem. We would agree to one of these if it would help to stop the invasion of South Vietnam and if we were assured that the results of one of those solutions would be respected and guaranteed.

Question: Mr. President, you said each time, "No Communist Party as such." Now, Sir do you really mean that, "No Communist Party as such?" In other words, that these people who are Communists now, members of the NLF, if they dissolve their National Liberation

Front and become another national organization, would they also have to say that they are not Communists?

President Thieu: I meant no Communist Party as such, no official Communist Party. In South Vietnam we will never accept the Communist ideology. But, we realize that there are men who would say, "We are not Communists. We are no longer Communists." However, they are actually Communists and we still have some of them around. Communism is contrary to the way we have chosen, it will not officially be allowed.

Question: Mr. President, would you accept the Alliance as a possible means for the NLF to engage in elections here, the Alliance for Peace and Democratic Forces?

President Thieu: No, the Alliance is a tool of the Front. We cannot accept them. However this does not mean that those who come back and agree to work with us and to give up their Communist ideology cannot form another political party.

Question: You said there were no conditions for talking with the NLF.

President Thieu: In the private talks, anyone can raise any question, and we might consider any question, any problem that might arise. The private talks in some way will help bring fruitful results and solve what we cannot solve in the official talks.

Question: Mr. President, even though you have received no word, do you expect that these private talks will take place?

President Thieu: Yes.

Question: How soon do you expect them to take place?

President Thieu: How soon, I cannot answer.

As you know, the Communist delegation does not have any initiative of its own. On everything they have to consult not only Hanoi but also Peking and Moscow. It is more so with the NLF who must consult their own people and their masters as well.

Question: Would Vice President Ky go to Paris and conduct the private meetings himself?

President Thieu: Very possibly. I think it's more difficult than the official talks.

Question: Do you see that the talks will be between Vice President Ky and the NLF, or that there will be four parties present?

President Thieu: In the private talks, either way. In the private talks we don't consider or require two sides, four sides, four delegations, four men, or any particular number of men.

Question: Anyway, these talks will be held in Paris?

President Thieu: It is more practical.

Question: Would it be possible to have two sets of private talks? Between Mr. Lodge and . . .

President Thieu: There are many alternatives. We can talk with Hanoi in the presence of the NLF, or without it.

Question: Do you think that the other sides are trying to do their best to keep the talks going, to keep them fruitful?

President Thieu: I don't believe they have made the maximum efforts.

Question: Are the political parties in Vietnam strong enough to withstand anything that might come up?

President Thieu: They are strong enough to fight against the Communists if the latter are not allowed to be an official party and to practice the Communist ideology. I think it is too soon for Vietnam to accept a Communist party. You have to realize that the Communists here in South Vietnam do not abide by any political rules. We already have one and look what they are doing. Some people ask me why we cannot accept a Communist party in Vietnam if it is not subservient to Peking or Moscow. The answer to this is that we have to consider what kind of man Ho Chi Minh is. He is not a Vietnamese Communist; he is a member of the Chinese Communist Party. He cannot be a Tito. It is very important for the free world to see what the intentions of the Chinese are and what kind of schemes they are up to, even if we have a peace settlement in South Vietnam. They are fighting a war by proxy in Laos, Thailand, and Burma. I don't believe that even if the war ceases in South Vietnam, the Communists will withdraw from the panhandle in Laos. They would occupy Phong Saly and Sam Neua and continue to wage war in Laos and they will not let us alone.

Question: Would you give us your opinions of the problems you face domestically?

President Thieu: My greatest concern domestically is to be ready as soon as possible to engage in a political war, because, even though they are stubborn in Paris, I don't believe the Communists will continue to have this attitude for long. Time is against them: I believe they will accept substantive talks. They will not wait until they are completely weak before having substantive talks. They know their weaknesses. When they are convinced that if they continue they will become weaker and weaker, then they will engage in substantive talks. This will come about sometime this year. They know how to accept very reasonable conditions when

they realize they cannot have better ones. We have had much experience in this with them.

In 1954 when Ho Chi Minh took power in Hanoi, he was very weak. The Communist Party was not ready to take power then, but circumstances helped. Realizing that they had to find a way to chase away the Chinese—who at that time were not Communists yet—and destroy the Nationalist Party, they endeavored to reach a solution in replacing the Chinese with the French even though they had been carrying out a long struggle against the latter. The first priority then was how to get help from the Nationalists in order to chase away the Chinese and to promote the revolutionary spirit to fight against the French. They did it in nine years, but even after their victory at Dien Bien Phu, they were still weak and had to accept half a nation. A moderate gain indeed. Their aim was then to get rid of the French in order to have a free hand against the South Vietnamese.

Then in 1956-58, they began to invade the South. They believed they could overrun the South by 1965 which was to be the last phase of the invasion. But this time they made a mistake about the determination of the U.S. to help Vietnam fight back the invasion. It was a political as well as military mistake. They did not think that American troops could arrive in Vietnam so fast.

Things have become increasingly difficult for them. From 1965 until now they have lost and lost. They have no hope of winning. What they are trying to do now is to chase an Army of 500,000 Americans out of Vietnam and to regain a free hand in subjugating South Vietnam later on. They know how to be patient.

Their immediate purpose is to obtain a peace solution with very weak guarantees. That is why I have told you many times that peace is very important but that the guarantee is even more so. If this time we don't have a strong guarantee for peace we might

fail again as we did in 1954. The Communists only want to neutralize the influence of the free world so that they may renew the invasion.

Question: Are your forces strong enough to begin replacing American troops? And how soon? And how many?

President Thieu: I think that depends on three conditions: First, that infiltration from the North either decreases or ceases entirely. Second, that the Communists not escalate the war. Third, that we have more substantive talks in Paris—that we have more hope for peace. Otherwise withdrawal would be misunderstood as an abandonment of Vietnam. It would have a very bad psychological effect on the South Vietnamese people, and would encourage the North Vietnamese to infiltrate again and to escalate the war. So the withdrawal of American troops is not a purely technical or military matter. It is also a psychological and political matter.

NOTE: The interview was conducted in English. The full transcript of President Thieu's remarks has been edited for purposes of clarity and brevity. However, every effort has been made to preserve the substance and spirit of President Thieu's comments.