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TO: Ambassador Lodge  
FROM: Ed Lansdale  
SUBJECT: Elections, Regionalism, US Influence

Believe you will find the attached memo of interest.  
It reports a talk that Rufe Phillips had with three former, senior  
GVN officials who commented on the topics noted in the subject  
above.

CC: Ambassador Porter  
Mr. Habib  
Mr. Hart  
Mr. Wilson

SLO:EGLansdale:pag  
September 10, 1966

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TO: General Lansdale

FROM: Rufus C. Phillips (B)(6) State

SUBJECT: Conversation with [ ] Tran Chanh  
Thanh and Tran Van Lam on September 6, 1966

1. The other day I ran into Tran Chanh Thanh at the Cercle Sportif, who invited me to dinner at his house on 6 September. [ ] whom I had seen previously (see memo dated August 15) and Tran Van Lam were there. During the dinner the conversation turned naturally to the present situation in Vietnam. The views of all three Vietnamese seemed to be in basic agreement. Concerning the elections, they felt that preparations had been too hasty, and that the Government should have tried to effect more of a reconciliation with the Buddhists and other dissident elements prior to holding the elections. Not only should Buddhists and former Diem Government prisoners have been released, they felt, but those in power should have manifested greater good will towards participants in previous governments who still possessed some political stature. Unfortunately, when General Ky first came to power he had insulted a number of people and had never tried to make amends. They said that it would have been better to have released political prisoners a month ago or even sooner, but that a release even a few days before the election would help establish greater confidence in the government's intentions. The elections were handicapped because the lack of a climate of confidence had prevented many political figures from presenting themselves as candidates and had thus left the door open for others, many of whom were pushed into running by the Military. Thanh and Lam said they might have seriously considered being a candidate if they had had more confidence in the Government's intentions. (B)(6) State

2. The main concern of all three seemed to be that the Constituent Assembly not be turned into a National Assembly by Thieu and Ky, without another election. They felt that if this happened the whole process of elections and of establishing a legal base of government would have again been violated, and that this would be this Government's downfall as it had been Diem's downfall.

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3. I remarked that I was pleased to see Vietnamese from the North [ ] Center (Thanh), and South (Lam) on friendly terms with each other. Lam said that he felt that most of the ill-will between Northerners and Southerners was generated within the government administration itself by the fact that each new government official, as he came in, tended to bring in people around him from his own region. Also, within the government itself, the Northerners and, to some extent the people from the Center, tended to dominate the Southerners and that all three groups worked against each other along regional lines. He felt that the regional problem could be overcome by a greater reconciliation among Vietnamese factions and by having future governments honestly elected and therefore not as open to partisan power grabbing as coup governments.

4. [ ] said that he felt that the U.S. asserted at present a great influence on the internal affairs of Vietnam, much greater than during the time of the Diem Government, because the present leaders and most of those since 1963 did not have a clear concept of what it was they were trying to do. Diem was wrong in many things, he said, but at least he had some strength of character and definite ideas. [ ] said the present government leaned more heavily on the Americans than perhaps we realized. He cited an instance back in March of this year when Archbishop Le huu Tu had come to see him during the Archbishop's visit to Vietnam. [ ] said that the Archbishop had related to him an interview that he had had with General Thieu. The Archbishop had urged that the Government assist in effecting a reconciliation between the Catholics and Buddhists by releasing many of the political prisoners which were then currently held in jail. Thieu had told him that he could do nothing because the Americans felt that any such release would generate a revolt by the Buddhists. Thieu then asked the Archbishop to intercede directly with the Americans on this matter. The Archbishop had replied that this was the Government's business, not his. The Archbishop expressed amazement to [ ] that Thieu, who had at one time served under the Archbishop in North Vietnam, should be so vacillating and without convictions as to being capable of expressing forcibly his point of view to the Americans. I pointed out to [ ] that undoubtedly Thieu was trying to use the

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Americans as an excuse for an action which he personally felt might lose him support from the non-Catholics. [ ]  
said, perhaps, but what actually happened was that the Buddhists had rebelled against the Government anyway.

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5. Thanh and [ ] (B)(6) State stated that there was entirely too much division and suspicion among Vietnamese and that there had been a general demoralization in the army and the civil service since 1963. Corruption was now extremely widespread and this was sapping everyone's morale. General Khanh had contributed to this deterioration probably more than any of the governments after Diem by deliberately pitting one political element against another and by introducing widespread corruption into the Vietnamese Army. They all felt that it would be difficult and it would take time for the Vietnamese to pull themselves out of the present state of anarchy. They agreed that the current elections could be a constructive step forward, but they emphasized a caveat that the present government had to promote conciliation and unity and must not try to rig the work of the Constituent Assembly in order to perpetuate themselves in power. Otherwise the Government would not be able to generate enough support to accomplish anything against the Viet Cong.

6. [ ] Thanh and Lam asked me to pass on to you their warmest regards and their hopes to have a chance to chat with you informally in the future.

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SLO:RCPhillips:rm  
September 7, 1966

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