



Box
96-3
SENSITIVE

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TO: Ambassador Bunker
FROM: Ed Lansdale (B)(6) State
SUBJECT: Talk with [] October 1

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(B)(6) State [] called at my house the evening of September 30, hoping to see me. I could not talk to him then so I made a date for the following day. [] came to the house Sunday morning, October 1. Accompanying him were [] and [] (who acted as interpreter), both being friends of mine. Cal Mahler of my staff also was present. (B)(6) State

[] said that, with Nguyen van Kieu out of the country, President-elect Thieu had asked [] to have liaison with me for Thieu. I commented that I had seen Thieu the evening before. [] said that he hadn't known this, but was seeing Thieu the afternoon of October 1 and had promised him to take up two matters with me: the immediate problem of the Buddhists and the longer range problem of collaboration between Americans and Vietnamese for the "construction" of a free Viet Nam. (Comment: [] is known to be an unusually close friend of Thieu's brother, Kieu, and was one of the early leaders of the Dai Viet Party. Strangely enough, [] who was present at our Sunday morning meeting had told me recently that Thieu was secretly opposed to the Dai Viets. Yet, it was obvious that [] and [] trust one another and, I believe, are sincerely trying to help Thieu. It is reasonable that Thieu would have asked [] to see me.) (B)(6) State

(B)(6) State [] stated that President-elect Thieu had asked him to establish a "semi-official" liaison with Thich Tri Quang and others in the An Quang Pagoda. [] and Kieu had made a number of contacts with Buddhists for Thieu prior to the September 3 elections, which Kieu had mentioned to me once. [] said that he had had two private talks with Tri Quang, just before the Buddhist demonstration in front of the Palace; he has not seen Tri Quang again, since Tri Quang is now camped publicly in the park in front of the Palace gates and there is no chance for a private talk.

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At their first talk together, said [] Tri Quang had started out with an aggressive attack on Thieu and on [] for representing Thieu. Tri Quang scoffed that Thieu was trying to buy time, the next five days, so that he could get the Assembly to validate his election as President, despite the known fact that the election had been rigged. [] said that he had replied that he was talking as a nationalist of good will, a man with "familial" relations with Thieu and Kieu) and with known friendliness towards the Buddhists. As for the "five days," it was far more important to consider the time span of the next four years, when the new President could get the nation on a true course towards the future. Tri Quang finally admitted that he had four years of work ahead for himself, also, in unifying the Buddhists and in gaining a position where he could help Viet Nam strongly.

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[] said that he attempted to get Tri Quang to express willingness to separate religious problems from political problems, but that Tri Quang kept introducing political factors. Because of this, [] said that he had later advised Thieu to make plain the distinction between a religious matter which is up to the Buddhists themselves to resolve and political matters which are up to the people to decide under the new Constitutional process. I commented that I believed this to be wise advice.

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[] then noted a factor that further complicated the present situation -- the relationship between Thieu and Ky over the Buddhist problem. Those close to Thieu had been told by one of Ky's friends, Dr. Pham huu Chuong, a member of the National Leadership Committee and thus presumably in a position to know, that the Americans had been behind Decree 23 which gave the Buddhist Charter to the Tam Chau faction. Chuong had told them that either Ambassador Bunker personally, or an American who directly represented Ambassador Bunker, had brought Decree 23 to Thieu and had asked him to sign it as Chief of State. Decree 23 was seen as favoring Ky's aims at the time, to weaken Thieu's position. I commented bluntly that this sounded like the wildest sort of story, was completely out of keeping with both U.S. policy and the character of the American Ambassador. I added flatly that I didn't believe the story, couldn't possibly believe it. [] wondered aloud why a man of the calibre of Dr. Chuong would have told it, then. I replied that, since [] was seeing Thieu later in the day, he should ask Thieu directly; I was sure that Thieu would laugh at it as being preposterous.

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[] continued that he also had described Tam Chau's offer to give up the Charter and talk with the An Quang group, when Chau met with Tri Quang. Tam Chau had placed his hand over his left breast and had said that he was offering this from his soul. If Tam Chau has the valor to meet with you, why don't you (Tri Quang) have the valor to meet with him? Tri Quang stated bitterly that he had no desire to talk with a "betrayer." [] then pointed out that it was Tri Quang who was taking the Buddhist problem outside religious circles and into the political arena, by demanding that the Thieu Government settle this internal matter of the religion. Tri Quang then blamed the Americans for this, mentioning that Ambassador Lodge had assigned John Negroponte to watch him up close for 24 hours after Tri Quang left his asylum in the American Embassy in 1963; since then, continued Tri Quang, the Americans have been keeping him under secret surveillance and doing all possible to destroy him. For example, Negroponte is now behind Tam Chau. (I explained to [] that this was a crazy twist to the friendly action of having an American stay close to Tri Quang the first day he left the Embassy, to which he had flown in fear of his life, simply to be sure that he came to no harm. [] commented that he hadn't known enough of the details to reply adequately to Tri Quang -- and had been somewhat taken aback by the violent tone of Tri Quang's attack on "Americans.")

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[] noted that Tam Chau had offered to have Decree 23 annulled (not just suspended), while the two main Buddhist groups discussed the internal organization of the Vien Hoa Dao. If the Government annuls the Decree, and Tam Chau meets with Tri Quang, [] believes strongly that Tri Quang will come out on top. [] said that Tam Chau simply does not have sufficient support within Buddhist circles to win out over Tri Quang, despite the fact that a number of An Quang leaders, particularly the Southern bonzes, are essentially moderates and have become restive under Tri Quang's adamant militancy. I commented that [] was saying, in effect, that Tri Quang was in a position of "heads I win, tails you lose," or a sure winner regardless of what Thieu could do. [] admitted that this was about right and asked what the Americans would do to help, since Tri Quang was going to be working hard to get the Americans out of Viet Nam. I replied that, if the Buddhist problem was too much of an internal religious problem for the GVN, then it was even more so for the U.S. Government. It seemed to me that it was time that the Vietnamese really made up their minds whether or not they wanted U.S. help for their freedom.

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We Americans are ready enough to go home, with the American public wondering if the Vietnamese people desire freedom enough, for all the expenditure of the lives of young Americans here.

I suggested that we might talk briefly on the other topic [] had mentioned, the collaboration of Vietnamese and Americans, since we had spent close to two hours on the Buddhists -- and [] did say that he had to break away to see Thieu. [] agreed readily to this. I said that I had a couple of personal ideas that I would describe briefly, and then we might talk about the ideas further the next time we met. I noted that Ky had been wise enough to have a personal staff, close to him, which also could discuss problems informally with a handful of Americans. Thieu doesn't have this. Although Ambassador Bunker and President-elect Thieu see each other with increasing frequency, a happy development that can only lead to more understanding and a means towards constructive actions in helping Viet Nam, the staffs of each of these men could be working together more to make the meetings of the leaders even more productive. I suggested that Thieu might give serious thought to selecting one or two assistants for this purpose, men whom he could trust, who would have ready access to Thieu, who could both think for themselves and speak plainly to Thieu when necessary, and who could work with Americans. On the U.S. side, Ambassador Bunker could do the same. I imagined that he would select one or two knowledgeable and dedicated people, probably from the Political Section. I added that I would be happy to help get such a fruitful liaison started, if the two principals agreed to this proposal.

[] replied that this struck him as a very sound idea. He then asked me sharply if the Americans would insist on having one of Ky's staff included in such an arrangement. I said that this might prove useful, but that I had stressed that Thieu should pick staff members he talked to readily, and trusted. The U.S. truly wanted Thieu and Ky to work together as a team, and I hoped that the staffs could help bring them closer together. [] nodded yes, he understood.

I then said that I had a personal, unofficial suggestion -- since we were talking as friends -- on Vietnamese and American collaboration for "construction" in Viet Nam. I noted that the principle of the JCRR in Taiwan was well worth considering, since it provided a way for dedicated technicians coming from the people of two countries to work together. It had been most successful in Taiwan, where there were three Chinese and two Americans on the Commission, with the

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Chinese serving as Chairman. The Chiefs of State of each country had selected the Commissioners. Although the problems of wartime Viet Nam are considerably different than those of Taiwan, the principle involved might well have application in Viet Nam, since we can benefit by any arrangement that will help Vietnamese and Americans work closely together as trusted comrades. [] (b)(6) State commented that he desired to talk about this at greater length very soon.

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As he was leaving, [] said that Tri Quang was attempting to take tactical advantage of any divisions or misunderstandings between the Americans, Thieu, and Ky and that these three must approach problems jointly. I replied that I felt that a very good start had been made and that we all needed to give our best efforts to keep working together and understanding one another -- not only due to the opposition of persons such as Tri Quang, but for the desired future good of Viet Nam. [] agreed fervently.

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(Comment: I remain somewhat cautious about the role of [] He (b)(6) State sounded deeply sincere and I know that he enjoys the close friendship of Thieu's brother, Kieu. Yet, Thieu did not mention [] to me. Further, I wonder about the effectiveness of using a Northern Dai Viet as an intermediary with Tri Quang and the Centrist and Southern factions of the An Quang Pagoda.)

cc: Ambassador Locke (personally)
General Westmoreland (personally)
Ambassador Komer (personally)
Mr. Calhoun/Mr. Recknagel (personally)
Mr. Hart/Mr. Lapham (personally)

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