

MEMORANDUM

TO: William Connell  
FROM: Rufus Phillips  
DATE: 25 July 1967  
SUBJECT: The Vietnamese Elections

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1. This Memorandum is based on extensive conversations I had with many influential Vietnamese during my recent trip to Saigon. Most of these conversations were reported to Ambassador Bunker, whom I believe tends to share these views but who does not yet have full Washington backing for strong moves to make the elections free and honest. Part of the problem is that Washington priorities are still on troops and pacification rather than on the elections.
2. The up-coming Presidential and Senatorial elections in Vietnam are the last chance for the Vietnamese to develop a cause, in the form of honest, representative Government, which they will be willing to fight for. This cause does not at present exist, although there is much hope that it may emerge out of the elections. For this cause to emerge, the elections must, above all, be free and honest. At present, the prospects for honest and free elections for the Presidency are not promising. Prospects for free Senatorial elections are better.
3. The reason Presidential election prospects are not promising is that the Vietnamese Army Corps Commanders, who hold the major share of power in Vietnam, are bent on maintaining themselves in power by ensuring the election of Thieu and Ky, whom they control. It was they who forced the last minute Thieu-Ky marriage, and it is they who will be giving the orders to the Province Chiefs to turn out the vote for this ticket. The villagers will follow the instructions of the Province Chiefs to avoid harassment after the elections are over; and these instructions will be given in a way which outside observers will be unable to detect. There will be little or no obvious election fraud, but the result is likely to be a phoney Presidential election. Behind this facade, the present political vacuum is likely to continue with the Americans being obliged to assume more and more responsibility for the war as the Vietnamese stand aside.
4. The alternative for the U. S. is to push for some practical steps to assure that the elections are reasonably honest and free of coercion, but there is little

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time left. These steps can be summarized as follows:

- a. Give the elections immediate, top priority attention on the U. S. side over all other matters and programs, including troops and pacification.
- b. Get the Constituent Assembly, the Government and the Candidates to concur in the designation of an Election Coordinator. At present responsibility for the election campaign is divided between several committees and the equivalent of an Under-Secretary level in the Government. Gen. Thang, the present Minister of Revolutionary Development, is an obvious choice provided the U. S. puts the elections in temporary top priority over pacification.
- c. If at all possible, get Thieu and Ky to resign their Government positions during the campaign, preferably turning over the Government to the Deputy Prime Minister, Vien. In the words of one leading Senatorial candidate to whom I talked, "this will make the elections at least 50% honest which is all we ask for". This man went on to say that if Thieu and Ky are not in office, many of the Province Chiefs are likely to be neutral because the results no longer seem certain. It may be too late to achieve this latter objective, in which case full backing could at least be given to having a strong election coordinator who could again turn out the Dalat Academy students and others to serve as poll watchers, an operation which was so successful during the Constitutional Assembly elections.

5. Some Americans fear the danger of a coup if Thieu and Ky were to resign, but a coup to ensure dishonest elections is highly unlikely. As one high-ranking Vietnamese Army Officer put it to me, "the Corps Commander who tries to pull a coup to disrupt the elections won't even be followed by his own aide-de-camp". He repeated the same thing when asked whether the Army might pull a coup after the elections against an honestly elected civilian President.

6. The precise nature of the changes required on the Vietnamese side to ensure honest and free elections must be left up to Ambassador Bunker. Pious public and private declarations from Washington as well as sending election observers will not suffice, and will only reinforce Vietnamese opinion that we simply do not understand what is going on in Vietnam. Given full backing to engineer

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whatever changes are necessary to ensure free elections, I am sure that Ambassador Bunker can bring this off.

7. Without changes on the Vietnamese side, the elections could come off without much disturbance and appear reasonably honest even though they are not. But this could still mortally hurt the U. S. even though the wounds would not be immediately apparent. The reason is that the election of Thieu and Ky would be so tainted that this, in addition to the fact that they are enmeshed in the wide-spread corruption which exists within the present Government and Army, would make reform of a system, of which they are captives, impossible. Without reform, the Vietnamese Army will not fight and will not pacify. What spirit has been generated by the leadership of people like Gen. Thang will disappear as he, and others like him, resign. It will then become an American war with no end in sight and no grounds existing for honorable negotiations. This situation may not deteriorate so rapidly as to become the basis for a Democratic election defeat in 1968, but it will cause an increasing loss of American lives and money until we are forced to make a final decision to pull out in disgrace or take-over entirely. I do not believe that free and honest senatorial elections, alone, will reverse the process of political deterioration.