

Prime Minister Tran Van Huong

Saigon, July 4 and July 8, 1968 (total of four hours, private)

Mr. Huong received me in his office on both occasions, the first for slightly less than two hours, the second for slightly more. We spoke in French, the conversations were quite relaxed and easy. Statements not for quotation are marked in red. Mr. Huong, who confides that he is actually 67, instead of 64, as his official biography states, ~~he~~ said that in the southern "mountains" (i.e. hills of the southwest), where he was born (), they didn't keep vital statistics. He was a school teacher, and is called "Uncle", or, more generally "Maitre", or Master, by his former students of the high school at My Tho. He is Confucian. and

His scholarly ~~demeanor~~ demeanor is disarming, ~~as~~/though in behavior he is quite austere, he is extremely soft-voiced and gentle in conversation, relaxed, smiles easily; his face is indeed somewhat "leathery", as UPI described him, but not "craggy", another phrase Dan Southerland used for him. His Butch haircut is oddly at variance with his features, but he has worn it that way for so many years that everyone simply accepts it as natural-looking. His desk is piled with file folders, arranged before him in neat piles; his staff claim that he works through them rapidly, is systematic and thorough. During our first visit he was seated at his desk when I entered, signing some papers. I waited about one minute while he finished; he arose and led me to the sofa at the end of the room. The second time, he met me at the door with outstretched hand and a broad smile, and again we sat side by side on the sofa. Neither of us touched our tea during the entire period of the conversations, and he insisted that I call him "Mr. Huong" rather than Mr. Prime Minister, reminding me that we had known each other for many years. He speaks no English; his French is excellent. The first time he wore a rather old gray business suit, apparently the one he has worn for nearly four years. The second time he wore the semi-military fatigue shirt and trousers (gray) worn by many of the cabinet in recent years to show their non-mandarinal character and lack of ceremoniousness. He wears very low ankle socks and pointed black shoes (not new). He finds writing rather difficult, since he has arthritis in his fingers.

He edited and published with commentaries a well-received version of "Kim Thach Ky Duyen" (a classical Chinese romance, in Vietnamese). It is dedicated to Bui Hieu Nghia, the author. Some Vietnamese scholars consider that the real author was Huynh Man Dat, which is sort of like asserting that Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays. I reminded him of this, and he laughed and said he was aware that Dat's grandson, Ngo Ngoc Dong, is bringing out a new and more complete version of the romance, and asserting that his grandfather was the true author, but Huong claims that the fact that Dat had a more complete version of the story in his possession did not make him the author; that he (Huong) has checked this out thoroughly and is fully convinced of the authenticity of the version he published -- and by implication that of Dat was an embellished version (in the old days they had no printing presses and manuscripts were copied by hand, with occasional changes by the copyists).

He observed that he had many problems in forming his cabinet, since many he approached preferred to remain outside the government for the time being (still attentiste); others agreed to work with him but would not work with Thieu. Still others insisted on posts he could not give them. And some he selected were unacceptable to Thieu. (I reminded him that few prime ministers have a blank check and no refusals when they form their governments; his case is not unusual.) In the last analysis he got perhaps 60% of what he wanted in his cabinet, so it isn't the best possible, but it also isn't too bad.

Thieu came to him in May 1967, before the election campaign opened (before Ky declared?) and asked him to run for President, and offered to run as the Vice Presidential candidate on such a ticket (which would have been unbeatable). He declined. When Thieu won the election he asked Huong three times to be Prime Minister, but Huong declined, and Thieu then told him that he wanted him to organize a loyal opposition to the regime. Huong said he didn't know how he could be expected to form such a group, when the govt itself had not yet taken office.

When the Loc cabinet had clearly failed and Thieu came again to Huong, Amb. Bunker added his pressure as well, and Huong, who wanted a chance to show what he could do, agreed. But he made it clear to Thieu that he wanted a free hand to organize his programs and must be assured of Thieu's support, especially in the drive to eliminate corruption. Thus far, he said, Thieu has been behind him 100% of the way. How long the honey moon may last he does not know, but he has great confidence that it will continue for the foreseeable future. As for Ky: he is young; his future may still lie before him, but he is corrupt, and his men are corrupt. They have stolen hundreds of millions of piasters, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to trace most of it, for they covered their tracks carefully.

One thing bothers him a good deal: the Americans keep trying to force him to work with Ky, and to make Thieu keep Ky in an important place. "I told Ambassador Bunker that you ask me to do something about corruption; yet you force me to work with Ky, who is the most corrupt of them all." "When you see Mr. Bunker, please ask him not to press me to work with Ky!" (This is not a "Vietnamese" kind of arrangement, however much it may appeal to Americans.)

As for his program, his problems, and his objectives: pretty much his campaign platform of 1967, with emendations:

First, restore the authority of the state. The law and the constitution must be applied and observed. Then there won't be any more corruption, etc. The people must have confidence in their leaders, and this has been lacking. (Minh chủ = le chef éclairé)

Second, we must inspire confidence in the leaders and in the future of the country.

Third, prosecute the war; change tactics and military and police leaders wherever and whenever necessary.

Fourth, aid to the people so that they may

- a) live in tranquility -- without illegal taxation, corruption, and tyranny;
- b) have enough to live on;
- c) have available culture, education, entertainment.

Fifth, eliminate corruption

- a) if you kill off all the corrupt civil servants, the offices will be emptied;
- b) if you put them in prison, there wouldn't be enough cells to hold them; to
- c) they are very clever and careful/conceal their misdeeds.

As for the city of Saigon, which presents special problems and is close to his heart since he was the Prefect in 1954, there are three immediate areas of concern and action:

- a) clean up the city -- garbage, streets, dirt, debris;
- b) try to work out the traffic snarls;
- c) assure security.

"I have appointed a new mayor and police chief; I'm giving them three months to do the job, or get out!! (He was unfamiliar with the Doxiadis study of Saigon and its urbanization problems and possibilities, and said he would ask Thieu for his copy (which I had sent to Thieu last October) to study.)

On foreign policy, war, peace:

1. a govt of coalition is impossible. There are no longer nationalists among the leaders of the NLF -- all are tainted and unsavable. "We are ready to talk with them as members of the Lao Dong Party of the DRV, but not to recognize them as a state within a state. Now the Alliance may still have a few nationalists among its members, but most are Communists. The lady doctor, for example, has a record as having been a member of the French Communist Party. Incidentally, the Ven. , of the Alliance, faked a kidnapping a few months ago; but we know his record and know him to be a Communist. No, what we fear is not Communists masquerading as bonzes, in their robes, but rather bonzes who are Communists. Take Tri Quang, for example, there is a man who has been a Communist for many years; very shrewd, politically brilliant, but a Communist; yes, I believe his French police record; and I know his family associations, too.

2. It is false to call this a war between South Vietnamese; it is aggression by the DRV, and of those fighting here, from 40% to 70% of the so-called VC units are Northerners.

3. When the Communists agree to talk with the GVN on terms of equality, then peace can be discussed and perhaps achieved.

4. The U.S. use of intermediary leaders and nations -- both private and public -- to get Hanoi to the peace table was understood by Vietnamese and Chinese (and most Asians) to indicate "Thai-do nguoi quan-tu" = une attitude de flechissement, de faiblesse, s'inferiorite. And the CC and DRV make propaganda effectively to this effect: "See, the Americans can't succeed and are suing for peace."

TVHuong interview by Daniel Southerland (UPI) - 6/26/68

TVH said his govt is gaining pop support but won't be strong enough to enter peace talks for at least one ~~or~~ or two more years. His "craggy, leathery face". . . SandNVN must be main parties in any negots to end war. "But before talking w/Hanoi we must improve our position both polit and econ. Mil sit is not too bad, but we have still not entirely recovered the confidence of the people. The govt must work hard to win it."

Talks in figures of speech: "sampan of state", etc. He is 64, a clean desk man, office quiet and austere as a monastery cell. His mins call him "Uncle" "The Old Man" or "The Venerable One." His admirers consider this self-made son of a laborer to be SVN's answer to HCM,

No grand gestures; wore same gray suit and black shoes he wore when served as PM 3½ years ago. But has recently been induced to buy two more suits to supplement his one-suit wardrobe.

In 65 when he first was PM, Buddhists rioted in streets. A few days ago, Budds proclaimed their support for him, their former foe. Ub k965 served as PM three months; expects longer tenure this time.

"Situation has improved from many points of view in the past months. We've managed to keep prices from rising too steeply; in fact, in some cases, they've dropped slightly. Comm lines are open despite VC effort to cut them. And now have a unified mil comd ~~in~~ for Sgn area for first time. There have been mass VC surrenders. That's a good sign. (But) the crux is a crisis of confidence in the Sgn govt, he said. The people have been deceived too much; their attitude is one of distrust of everything: distrust of the spiritual legacy of our ancestors, distrust of effectiveness and sincerity of one's elders, and especially distrust of the govt."

Corruption major problem. And re Ky: "My. Ky is a very young man. He has a long future ahead of him." And TVH said he not more "dovish" than Thieu or Ky: "I know the Communists very well. They killed two of my sons because they did not go along with Com. ideology." His third son is his private secy.

Sees no progress whatsoever in Paris peace talks because Hanoi is w/out goodwill.