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Vice President Reports on his Vietnam Trip

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SUMMARY NOTES OF 578th NSC MEETING
November 8, 1967; 10:05 to 10:55

(The list of attendees is attached including members of the Cabinet and the legislative leaders who had been invited for this special meeting.)

The President: Opened the meeting by speaking of the difficult situation we face in Vietnam. We need all the help we can get in dealing with a problem which affects our national prestige. Council members, along with the Cabinet Secretaries and the Legislative leaders, had been called in to hear a report by the Vice President on his recent trip to Asia. Following his report, the Vice President would answer questions from any of those present.

The Vice President: He had visited Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. His report, of necessity, would consist of his personal observations. Comparisons would be made on what has happened in Vietnam in the last 20 months, when he was last there in February of 1966.

1. The United States team in Saigon has the confidence of the Vietnamese and of the representatives of the allied states taking part in the Vietnam war.

2. During conversations with both Thieu and Ky, he emphasized the importance of the relationship of these two leaders to each other and to the legislature.

3. The inaugural speech of Thieu was his own, not ghost written. Thieu is a serious man who appears to be fully aware of the importance of providing a stable government in South Vietnam.

4. Thieu was told flatly that progress towards the goals mentioned in his inaugural speech was most important to the continued support, not only of the governments, but also of the people -- of the allied countries supporting South Vietnam.

Military:

1. The spirit and morale of United States forces in Vietnam is high.

2. The United States-South Vietnamese RIVERINE Operation in the IV Corps is tremendously impressive.

3. The ARVN is improving, according to General Abrams, who is devoting his full time to this problem.

4. The ARVN fights well in some areas and not well in others, depending on its leaders.

5. The Vietnamese are fighting corruption among the military and promotions are now being made on the basis of merit.

6. Field promotions following successful operations have recently been inaugurated.

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7. The Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces needed additional training.

Political:

1. We should stop using the word "pacification" since it connotes a peaceful operation -- exactly the opposite of what is really involved. Obtaining security in rural areas is the toughest kind of a job which claims numerous lives.

2. Revolutionary Development is beginning to move. Cadre training is now very well done. Nine thousand trainees attend the Revolutionary Development school for twelve weeks. Thirty thousand cadres are already in the field. Sixty thousand will be at work in rural areas by 1968. The head of the RD training program said that the major problems in order of importance were corruption and the Viet Cong.

3. The current campaign against corruption would move forward.

In Summary: He was encouraged by his trip. The successful election process had produced a very good effect in Vietnam. U. S. logistics had vastly improved since his last visit. With respect to contribution of other nations, the new Thai troops are doing very well, the Koreans are extraordinary, and the Australian units' morale is very high.

Two problems which need attention:

1. The Communists are trying to win over the youth of South Vietnam. In Saigon, the youth problem needs immediate attention.

2. The South Vietnam Information Service is very poor. Correspondents attached to the South Vietnamese troops are not well provided for. In general, the South Vietnamese performance is not well reported because of the inadequacy of their treatment of U. S. correspondents. As for the U. S. press corps in South Vietnam, most responsible correspondents support our goals, even though they may be critical of certain actions which we have taken.

Turning to the other two countries visited, he said the acting head of Indonesia, General Suharto, and the Malaysian Prime Minister both told him that if the United States fails in Vietnam, all hope for a free Southeast Asia would be lost.

In Malaysia the Prime Minister said that the enemy in Southeast Asia is militant Asian Communism with headquarters in Peking.

Throughout his trip, he encountered no act of hostility or protest in either Malaysia or Indonesia.

Indonesia: Its capital city, Djakarta, shows the many failures of the Sukarno regime, e. g., unfinished buildings. His welcome in the capital was warm, but even warmer in central Java where more than a million and a half people turned out to greet him on very short notice. The Indonesians really want our friendship. They are enthusiastically trying to restore their economy. As a specific example, 30,000 men are working on earth works and clearing

out irrigation ditches which will soon be providing water for additional tillable acres.

No promises were made as to what we would do to help Indonesia. Suharto is an honest, hard-working man who benefited from his training at Fort Leavenworth. Many other Indonesian military leaders are now showing the great benefit of their military training in the United States. Our stakes are very high in Indonesia; as high as those in Japan and India.

Referring again to the progress being made in Vietnam, he said Thieu is neither arrogant nor abrasive, but he will not be a puppet. He appears willing to probe for peace. He may have trouble with the legislature which will soon be causing problems for him and for us -- the price of encouraging Vietnam to start down the democratic road.

In conclusion: Not all is well in South Vietnam but it is better than it was 20 months ago. We are making progress and we shall continue to progress.

The President: Asked Secretary Rusk if he wished to comment.

Secretary Rusk: Merely wished to point out that Thieu would be shortly announcing the new South Vietnamese Cabinet. As to Indonesia, he called attention to the help being given to Indonesia by many nations through multi-lateral organizations such as the World Bank and the Indonesian Consortium.

The President: Informed the group that Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland would soon be coming to Washington for consultation. Both would be available to appropriate committees should they desire to hear them.

Secretary McNamara: Delighted to hear the Vice President's report of progress in the military area. The military team in Saigon, Westmoreland, Abrams and Palmer, comprised our greatest military leaders.

General Wheeler: Seconded the comment made by Secretary McNamara.

The President: Continued around the table offering the participants the opportunity to ask questions.

Senator Hayden: No questions.

Senator Margaret Chase Smith: No questions.

Senator Fulbright: (To the Vice President) What is our objective in Vietnam?

The Vice President: The Malaysian Prime Minister adequately described our objective when he said the Malaysian defeat of the communists consisted of defeating the insurgency and building a nation. Malaysia had the help of the United Kingdom; Vietnam was being helped to build its nation by the United States.

Senator Fulbright: (To the Vice President) Did you say Peking was our enemy?

The Vice President: What he said was that the Asians believed their enemy was Peking.

Senator Fulbright: Who is the enemy -- Peking or Ho Chi Minh?

The Vice President: The Vietnamese know their enemy is the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. Wounded South Vietnamese soldiers know who the enemy is.

Senator Mansfield: Pleased to hear the mildly encouraging report of the Vice President. What is the monthly infiltration rate of North Vietnamese?

The Vice President: He had not asked this question in Saigon. Our team in South Vietnam supports the bombing. Our military leaders have no doubt that they can handle anything the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese could put against them. The very young Viet Cong prisoners we have captured are proof that the Viet Cong are having manpower and recruitment problems.

In a heart-to-heart talk, Ambassador Bunker said what is bothering him is why some people think he would be trying to deceive his fellow citizens. Bunker said his record of public service in many countries as well as his private life made clear the kind of a person he was and is. Bunker could not understand why some should now say that he is a different person than he had been in earlier years. Bunker said that all he is interested in doing at his age in life is working constantly to advance U. S. interests in Vietnam.

Senator Mansfield: Last September he had asked General Westmoreland about the monthly infiltration rate: the answer was approximately 6,500 to 7,000 per month. How does North Vietnam and Viet Cong strength compare with a year ago?

The Vice President: The strength is about the same as a year ago.

Senator Russell: The Vice President has made a fine statement which possibly could be boiled down a bit. When the laughter died down he commented that the bombing had not prevented a manpower buildup nor the movement of large

amounts of ammunition. What is the view with respect to a proposal to close the Port of Haiphong?

The Vice President: Recent bombing had been effective in sealing off the harbor of Haiphong from the interior. The Haiphong to Hanoi corridor had been hit effectively. Restrikes are continually necessary in order to keep the destroyed bridges from being repaired. All military commanders realize that air power is only one part of our overall military strategy in Vietnam.

Senator Russell: How can the Viet Cong move the thousands of tons of ammunition used against our forces in South Vietnam?

The Vice President: Viet Cong supplies are moved at night and some move through Laos and Cambodia. He had heard no complaint from the military about military decisions taken in Washington. Military officers indicated that they are pleased by the recent addition of certain targets which give them greater flexibility to conduct the air war.

Congressman Bates: Referred to a recent article in Look by General Bradley and asked how long our military leaders in Saigon thought the war would last.

The Vice President: He had encountered no prophets. Military officers agreed that the military effort of the Vietnamese is improving. We are making progress in the war. Ky was told of the severe criticism of the ARVN by U. S. citizens. Ky had instructed the ARVN to go on a 7-day week basis and additional efforts are being made to improve the training of the ARVN.

Representative Mahon: Has our stand in Vietnam affected the situation in Indonesia?

The Vice President: Our stand in Vietnam has had a collateral effect on developments in Indonesia. He had said in Djakarta that the change in Indonesia had been brought about by Indonesians and that it came about as a result not of our actions but theirs. However, it is thought that our presence in Southeast Asia gave confidence to the Indonesians to destroy the Communist Party in Indonesia.

(Note: Tom Johnson also has notes on this meeting.)

Bradley Smith

LIST OF INVITEES, NSC MEETING

November 8, 1967, Wednesday, 10:00 a.m.

Secretary of State Rusk
Secretary of Defense McNamara
JCS Chairman General Wheeler
OEP Director Daniel
USIA Director Marks
Secretary of Treasury Fowler

Attorney General Clark
Postmaster General O'Brien
Secretary of Interior Udall
Secretary of Commerce Trowbridge
Secretary of HEW Gardner
Secretary of Labor Wirtz
Secretary of HUD Weaver
Secretary of Transportation Boyd

Senator Mansfield
Senator Richard Russell
Senator Margaret Chase Smith
Senator Fulbright
Senator Hayden

Representative McCormack
Representative Bates
Representative Mahon

Walt Rostow
George Christian
Bromley Smith
Tom Johnson