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B. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN VIET-NAM

There were two fairly distinct phases of US efforts to encourage and assist the South Vietnamese to build a firm political foundation. In the first phase, the overriding objective was to restore political stability so that further moves could be undertaken to prosecute the war successfully. This period lasted roughly from November 1963 to mid-1965, and was characterized by almost continual political turmoil and constant governmental changes. During this period the emphasis in US advice and assistance was less on the actual form that political development should take (i.e., the exact type of government) and more on effective and stable government per se. This was stated clearly as US policy from the very start of the post-Diem period, when President Kennedy sent a message to Ambassador Lodge saying "...we thus have a responsibility to help this new government to be effective ...emphasis should be on effectiveness rather than on external

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appearances." 1/.

The second phase, beginning in mid-1965, of course had the same basic objective of improving the stability and effectiveness of the Government of Viet-Nam (GVN). However, once a modicum of this had been achieved by the expanded US military commitment and the installation of the Ky Government in June 1965, both US and GVN efforts were increasingly devoted to the specifics of steady constitutional development and return to legitimate democratic rule.

1. Political Developments in the Immediate Post-Diem Period

The loosely-organized junta of general and field-grade military officers who successfully overthrew Diem also suspended the Diem constitution on November 1, 1963. They had no specific ideas on a new constitution but focused instead on establishing a provisional government which could rule the country for an interim period until a new constitutional regime could be installed.

1/ Department of State Telegram 746, November 6, 1963 (~~TOP SECRET - EYES ONLY~~).

The military leadership, represented by Generals Tran Van Don and Le Van Kim, called on Ambassador Lodge November 3 to discuss their intentions. They noted that three types of government had occurred to the military leaders: first, a straight-out military junta; second, a government with a military majority; and third, a government in which the military had only a partial role. They said the third was the kind of government on which they had decided, i.e., a military committee presided over by General Minh, under which would be a prime minister and a cabinet of some 15 ministers, of which four or five would be military. They also said "this would be a provisional government which would last six months and even longer but certainly not two years." Lodge noted "They seemed to be completely decided that this was how they were going to do it." ^{2/}

On November 4 the military leadership issued Provisional Constitutional Act No. 1 in the name of the Military Revolutionary Council (the name they had decided on for themselves),

^{2/} From Saigon, Telegram 900, November 3, 1963

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or MRC. The act centralized legislative and executive powers in the MRC, designated the Chairman of the MRC General Duong Van Minh to be Chief of State, and delegated certain executive and legislative powers to a Prime Minister and a Provisional Government. Former Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho was named Prime Minister.

The military leaders stated their intention of returning power eventually to a civilian democratic regime. In a note to the US Embassy on November 5, the GVN Foreign Office said "Pending the drafting of a new constitution, which will be submitted to the Vietnamese people for approval, ... the President of the MRC will perform temporarily the duties of Chief of State." ^{3/} In a nationwide address on November 6 General Minh said, "In the very near future, when all the democratic institutions have been set up, the MRC will transfer all powers back to the entire people." The same day the Provisional Government issued a proclamation saying it would "devote itself to the task of building the foundations of a truly democratic regime."

^{3/} From Saigon, Telegram 944, November 6, 1963
(UNCLASSIFIED).

The United States recognized the new government on November 8, noting that the MRC's program included, among other things, a transfer of political power to a popularly-elected government when the situation should permit.^{4/}

Secretary Rusk, in his press conference of November 8, said "I think that developments in South Viet-Nam promise to move rapidly toward constitutional government, and a sense on the part of the people that they have a stake in their future."

In an effort to enlist greater civilian support and participation, the MRC also established on November 6 a "Council of Notables" (originally termed "Council of Sages") with advisory functions and including "personalities selected among representatives of all national tendencies and professional sectors." The Department welcomed the establishment of the Council as a means for politically conscious Vietnamese to participate in the political process, and suggested that the Council might be used by the MRC to help prepare recommended constitutional changes.^{5/}

^{4/} Department of State Circular Telegram 885, November 8, 1963 (~~CONFIDENTIAL~~)

^{5/} Department of State Telegram 755, November 7, 1963 (~~CONFIDENTIAL~~).

On December 19, the MRC named some 60 individuals to the Council. The Embassy reported "prevailing public opinion is that membership of Council constitutes representative cross-sections of political tendencies and interest groups," but noted the diversity and the strong-mindedness of many members and said the key factor was "how GVN and Council ... conceive of Council's functions and energy and effectiveness with which carried out." ^{6/} The Council actually had little chance to function in the political uncertainties leading to and following the coup of January 30, 196⁴₇, and it was dissolved by Prime Minister Khanh on April 4, 196⁴₇.

The military leaders, particularly General Minh, were undeniably popular immediately following the coup against Diem, and they exercised actual control of the GVN through a 12-man Executive Committee of the MRC. Minh was the Committee's chairman and the nation's de facto chief executive,

^{6/} From Saigon, Telegram 1226, December 28, 1963
~~(CONFIDENTIAL).~~

while Premier Tho was relegated to a background role. Through Ambassador Lodge, US efforts were dedicated in large part to advice to Minh on improving his effectiveness as a national leader and capitalizing on his and his colleagues' personal popularity to solidify support for the new government. Minh responded only slowly to such advice, however, and in the three months of its existence the Minh/Tho Government was unable to cope effectively with either the deteriorating security situation or growing internal political dissension.

2. The Nguyen Khanh Government and US Support

On January 30, 1964, Major General Nguyen Khanh, Commanding General of (I) Corps, took control of the GVN in a bloodless coup d'etat. Khanh was backed by several younger general officers such as III Corps Commander Tran Thien Khiem, Brigadier-General Nguyen Van Thieu who was then Commander of the 5th Division in Bien Hoa, and Civil Guard/ Self-Defense Corps Commander Duong Ngoc Lam. Khanh was also assisted by Colonel (later General) Nguyen Chanh Thi, his deputy in (I) Corps.

Khanh claimed the older generals were failing to run the GVN effectively or to meet the increased VC threat and were leading the country toward a "neutralist" solution (such as the one espoused in January by General De Gaulle) which would result in a complete communist takeover. He arrested Don and Kim and two other generals on the MRC Executive Committee, as well as a fifth general -- Nguyen Van Vy -- who had just returned from France where he had been in exile during the Diem regime.

The US Mission was not informed of coup moves until the last minute and had no chance to divert such an obviously ~~unwelcome~~ ^{11?} action. Once Khanh had seized control, US efforts were devoted to convincing him of the necessity to obtain as broad a political base for the new government as possible and to avoid further political disruption. The United States supported the new regime in order to contribute to the restoration of political stability and GVN effectiveness.

Khanh retained the basic provisions of the Provisional Constitutional Act of November 4, 1963, but he did away with the MRC Executive Committee and amended the act to permit himself to replace Minh as MRC chairman. At US urging he kept Minh on as Chief of State, which the Embassy considered of "key political importance" since it "provides a symbol of unity, especially for the Army, and sense of continuity and tends to undercut criticism of the manner in which Khanh engineered his takeover." ^{7/}

^{7/} From Saigon, Telegram 1533, February 14, 1964
~~(CONFIDENTIAL)~~

On February 8, Khanh named himself Prime Minister and presented a new Cabinet that the Embassy felt was "as close to a government of national union as appears attainable under prevailing circumstances." Lodge noted that Khanh had "attempted to assign cabinet positions with an eye to balance between geographic origins and religious affiliations of ministers, which I had advised him to do..." Lodge also believed that Khanh's assumption of the post of Prime Minister "reflects actual power factors involved and avoids inevitable carping which would have occurred if a purely political figure were appointed to this position." 8/

The Embassy was impressed with the new government and the leadership Khanh had exhibited up to that time. Lodge noted "US support remains a key factor in the situation and believe we should continue render this in the full measure." 9/
A month later US support for Khanh was reaffirmed by Secretary

8/ From Saigon, Telegram 1533, February 14, 1964
~~(CONFIDENTIAL)~~.

9/ Ibid.

of Defense McNamara after his visit to Viet-Nam in March. In his report to the President, he said about Khanh, "These evidences of energy, comprehension, and decision add up to a sufficiently strong chance of Khanh's really taking hold in the next few months for us to devote all possible energy and resources to his support ... the United States at all levels should continue to make it clear that we fully support the Khanh Government and are totally opposed to any further coups." 10/

Khanh had difficulty working with and controlling the diverse political elements in his Cabinet, and GVN effectiveness suffered as a result. He was also engaged in a personal rivalry with General Minh, whom he had in effect deposed on January 30. By June 1964 Khanh had decided to reorganize his government to rid it of those he felt were obstructing him (primarily the Dai Viet party politicians, led by Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Ton Hoan).

10/ Message from the White House to Ambassador Lodge, CAP64077 DTG 141560Z (March) (SECRET/EXDIS).

Ambassador Lodge and the Department sympathized with Khanh's position but shared concern over the unsettling effects a sweeping change in the GVN would produce at this time. They were particularly concerned about how it might affect preparations underway at the time in Washington regarding Viet-Nam, including consideration of actions against North Viet-Nam and a proposed Congressional resolution in support of US moves. The Department recognized that "the current governmental structure is less than ideal and that General Khanh needs some trusted political colleagues with whom he can share the burden of his responsibilities. However, unless he proceeds to reorganize his government in a gradual fashion and perhaps within the framework of some new draft constitutional process, a sweeping reshuffle would predictably give rise to an impression of confusion, internal bickering and misdirection." ^{11/} Lodge also expressed his worry about Khanh's reorganization and informed Khanh that "preparatory work was going on in Washington about Viet-Nam

^{11/} Department of State Telegram 2258, June 12, 1964
~~(SECRET-EXDIS)~~

... but these activities ... must not be upset by news of more changes in Viet-Nam which would give a further impression of instability." ^{12/} At Lodge's urging, Khanh promised to give Lodge sufficient advance notice of any changes and a list of all principal personnel involved; he also said he would make proper public preparations for any reorganization moves. ^{13/}

Despite its support for Khanh personally, the United States had continued to urge Khanh to cooperate with Minh to enlist the latter's support for the GVN as a whole. Such cooperation was not achieved, however, and by July Khanh was complaining openly of Minh's opposition to him. He also alleged Minh was maneuvering with other military and political figures against him.

The Embassy was concerned that Khanh's political position was deteriorating. To bolster Khanh's position, Ambassador Taylor noted to him on July 24 that "the US

^{12/} From Saigon, Telegram 2459, June 12, 1964
~~(SECRET-EYES ONLY)~~

^{13/} Ibid.

Government could not contemplate consequences of another change in government ... He, Khanh, must refuse to be discouraged ... and carry on." Khanh replied the United States could help him in two ways: (1) get word around that the United States condemns any more changes in government; and (2) talk to General Khiem and other military leaders about the nefarious effect of politics in the armed forces.^{14/} The Department approved this course of action and told Taylor "you may in your discretion sound Khanh out whether he wishes us to dissociate ourselves further from Minh and whether he needs our support in taking tough line against Dalat generals." ^{15/}

On August 3, Taylor again assured Khanh the United States was solidly behind him. Khanh said he was considering some move against Minh and wanted to know how the United States would react. Taylor said "We Americans

^{14/} From Saigon, Telegram 203, July 24, 1964
~~(SECRET-EXDIS)~~.

^{15/} I.e., the five generals Khanh had arrested on January 30 and later had confined in Dalat. Department of State Telegram 245, July 25, 1964
~~(SECRET-EXDIS)~~

had been happy to see Minh brought into government ... to contribute to creating the national unity so badly needed ... If, as Khanh insisted, Minh was not a help but a hindrance to unity, we had no further interest in him." ^{16/}

Taylor had some doubts about the GVN under Khanh but saw no alternative to him at that time. On August 10 he told the Department "Best thing that can be said about the present Khanh Government is that it has lasted six months and has about a 50-50 chance of lasting out the year although probably not without some changed faces in the cabinet ... There is no one in sight who could do better than Khanh ..." Taylor recommended the United States should "do everything possible to bolster the Khanh Government." ^{17/}

^{16/} From Saigon, Telegram 286, August 3, 1964
~~(SECRET-EXDIS)~~.

^{17/} From Saigon, Telegram 377, August 10, 1964
~~(SECRET-EXDIS)~~.

3. The Vung Tau Charter

Immediately following the Tonkin Gulf incidents in early August 1964, Khanh moved to consolidate his political position. On August 7 he issued an emergency decree giving him a legally freer hand in exercising executive power. On August 8 Khanh informed our Embassy's Political Counselor that, as a logical follow-up to his assumption of emergency powers, he intended to promulgate a provisional constitution within a few weeks and to establish a new provisional government.^{18/}

On August 14, in the seaside resort town of Vung Tau, Khanh showed Taylor and other Embassy officers a rough translation of the new constitution. They found it brusque in language and suggested to Khanh that in its present form it would raise criticism in the United States and in the world press. At Khanh's invitation, the Embassy's Political Counselor and Executive Secretary of the US Mission Council

^{18/} From Saigon, Telegram 355, August 8, 1964
~~(CONFIDENTIAL-LIMDIS)~~

met with the constitutional drafting commission to discuss the document. They made several suggestions to the commission, such as making clearer the new charter's provisional nature, stipulating that the military's assumption of authority would be relinquished as conditions permitted, and spelling out in more detail the rights of citizens. They also noted the whole document would be considered an unduly permanent formalization of a military takeover, and therefore careful public preparation was needed if this was to be done smoothly.^{19/}

Khanh stressed the need for urgency and said there was no time to receive professional legal advice from Washington. The Embassy, therefore, decided that its best efforts should be devoted to making the wording of the charter less brusque and to assisting the GVN in public relations measures explaining the necessity for this sort of change. Taylor stated, "Whether we like it or not, this is the constitutional form which the MRC fully intends to impose, and we

^{19/} From Saigon, Telegram 415, August 15, 1964
~~(SECRET-LIMDIS)~~

see no alternative but to make the best of it." ^{20/} The Department concurred with the Embassy's approach in attempting to effect changes in the proposed charter. ^{21/}

Khanh explained to Taylor that the new governmental system might well eliminate Minh from a top leadership position and asked Taylor's help in persuading Minh to be amenable to the new charter. Taylor told him "that ... as in the past I would do my best but doubted Minh could be brought to view impending events with any enthusiasm." He urged Khanh "to inform Minh of current planning in effort to make him a responsible participant." ^{22/}

On August 16 the new charter was promulgated. The Embassy found the final version much improved in tone and language over the original draft and substantially revised to reflect in large measure the suggestions made by the

^{20/} Ibid.

^{21/} Department of State Telegram 446, August 15, 1964 (~~SECRET-LIMDIS~~).

^{22/} From Saigon, Telegram 419, August 15, 1964 (~~SECRET-LIMDIS~~).

Embassy Political Counselor and Mission Executive Secretary in Vung Tau on August 14. ^{23/}

The Vung Tau Charter, as the new constitution was called, was based on the presidential system and provided for only one executive officer, who would replace both the Chief of State and the Prime Minister and who was elected by the MRC. The MRC also would select members of the Provisional National Assembly as well as the President of the High Council of Judges. The MRC elected Khanh President with 50 of the 58 votes cast.

The Embassy had misgivings about the inevitable slow-down within the GVN as a result of the change, and also about Khanh's ability to install a new cabinet, provisional assembly, and judicial organs within the one-month deadline called for in the Charter. However, the Embassy saw the Charter as having several worthwhile aspects. It provided the first legal basis for government and the first formal plan for succession since the overthrow of Diem. It did away with

^{23/} From Saigon, Telegram 441, August 16, 1964
(~~CONFIDENTIAL - LIMIDS~~).

the ministerial system and placed Cabinet members under greater executive discipline. It provided a provisional assembly to give politicians an opportunity to participate constructively in government, if they so chose. The Embassy suggested a public US stance that the "recent emergency decrees and provisional constitution respond to needs of situation as seen by MRC and provide Khanh and his government with better institutional framework for prosecuting war more vigorously." ^{24/}

Almost immediately Khanh found himself the target of violent criticism from Buddhist, student, and political groups. The Charter was widely interpreted as an effort to consolidate military control of the GVN and as an indication of more stringent control of the population to come. Initial resistance was led by students advocating civilian and democratic government, but leadership of the opposition was quickly asserted by Buddhist leaders who had in fact already launched a campaign of opposition to the GVN. Previously-

^{24/} From Saigon, Telegram 464, August 18, 1964
~~(SECRET-LIMDIS)~~

scheduled Buddhist demonstrations commemorating the 1963 struggle against Diem were turned into anti-Khanh, anti-Vung Tau Charter rallies.

On August 24, Taylor called on Khanh to impress on him the US view of the seriousness of the situation and to encourage him to take certain actions. Khanh agreed to Taylor's recommendations and said he would (1) announce his new government within the week; (2) meet the Buddhist leadership to hear its complaints and to enlist their help in forming a government; (3) announce that he was prepared to meet certain student demands, such as limiting press censorship and relaxing curfew hours; and (4) issue orders to the police to restore order and to prevent further violations of law by the demonstrators. Taylor told Khanh the Embassy would undertake to explain to Washington that the situation, while serious, was not falling apart and to tell the Buddhists that the US Government had "no sympathy for their divisive machinations." 25/

25/ From Saigon, Telegram 541, August 24, 1964
~~(SECRET - LINDIS)~~.

His professed firmness notwithstanding, the next day Khanh personally confronted a crowd of some 10,000-15,000 outside his office and was forced to agree tentatively to the demonstrators' demands for revocation of the Charter, dissolution of the MRC, and return of governmental control to civilian hands. That night he called a "rump" session of the MRC to confirm his concessions to the crowd, and the group grudgingly concurred.

A full meeting of the MRC was scheduled for August 26. Amid reports that that body might vote to displace Khanh completely, before the meeting Taylor sent word to Minh and several other generals that the United States wanted no change in government and that "our candidate was Khanh." Taylor reported to the Department "It was my conviction, in taking these actions, that the United States could not possibly afford confusion that would result from loss of Khanh, that internal maneuvers had to be stopped somewhere, and that Khanh is indeed the best bet we have in current circumstances." ^{26/}

26/ From Saigon, Telegram 559, August 26, 1964
~~(SECRET - EXDIS)~~

The MRC showed considerable reluctance to confirm the demands Khanh had acceded to the day before, and the day's session broke up without any decision reached. That evening Khanh met with Taylor and Deputy Ambassador Johnson to outline his ideas on how governmental control could be transferred to civilian hands as he had promised the crowds.^{27/}

The next day, August 27, the MRC abrogated the Vung Tau Charter, dissolved itself, and provided for the transfer of power to civilian control within 2 months' time. Rather than renaming Khanh exclusively as Chief Executive, however, the MRC established a triumvirate composed of Generals Minh, Khanh, and Khiem to function as an Executive during the transition period.

^{27/} Saigon Airgram A-496, December 29, 1964
~~(CONFIDENTIAL)~~.

4. Transition to Civilian Government

The Vung Tau Charter episode proved that the existing military leadership was incapable of ruling the country effectively by itself, as it had more or less done since Diem's overthrow. The triumvirate reflected the deep divisions within the military, divisions which could be (and were) successfully exploited by the various non-military political groups. The leadership had shown it was neither unified enough to remain above these groups nor strong enough to prevent them from creating political disruption. It was clear that a substantial degree of civilian participation was required for a return of political stability. United States efforts during this period were thus devoted to encouraging the smooth transition to a provisional civilian government as promised by the MRC.

The most immediate problem was to get Khanh and the military leadership to keep the GVN going in the interim transition period. On August 28, Khanh had flown off to Dalat for a "rest," and Deputy Premier Nguyen Xuan Oanh

announced he was "caretaker" Prime Minister while Khanh was in Dalat. The ensuing confusion as to who was actually in charge of the GVN threatened to increase the already substantial disruption of GVN activities. The United States had no confidence in Oanh's ability to run the GVN effectively, and on August 31 Taylor and Deputy Ambassador Johnson went to Dalat to urge Khanh to return to Saigon quickly and to take other measures giving evidence that he could still govern the country. Taylor told Khanh that "if he can give such evidence, the United States is still behind him. If we ever become convinced that he cannot lead his country to victory, he can no longer count upon us." 28/

The Department approved Taylor's line with Khanh, pointing out the "urgent necessity ... to get Khanh back into action and rehabilitate his prestige if possible." The Department also offered for Taylor's use a suggested letter from President Johnson to Khanh urging him to return to

28/ From Saigon, Telegram 684, August 31, 1964
~~(TOP SECRET - LIMDIS)~~.

Saigon.^{29/} The letter as finally drafted reflected US concern over the importance of the transition period and the need for a more stable political structure afterward: "I am impressed with the importance of the period between now and October 27 in determining the future of your country. From here, the problem appears to fall into two parts. The first is the need to establish means which will develop a national consensus concerning the form of a future and enduring government structure for the Republic of Viet-Nam. The second is ... to restore national morale by exhibiting tangible success against the Viet Cong."^{30/} (Because Khanh returned to Saigon shortly, Taylor felt the letter was not needed and it was never delivered.)

Khanh returned from Dalat September 4 and held a press conference to unveil publicly his ideas on the evolution of civilian government. As outlined to Taylor and Johnson

^{29/} Department of State Telegram 567, August 31, 1964 (~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

^{30/} Department of State Telegram 584, September 2, 1964 (~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

previously on August 25, his plan involved the formation of a council of personalities to decide within the two-month transition period, on the form of a new GVN, which would then be established and hold office provisionally until a permanent constitution could be approved by the entire electorate in a referendum. Khanh envisaged that the provisional government would be divided into three branches -- executive, legislative, and judicial -- with separation of powers. The legislative branch would have the additional task of drafting the permanent constitution.

On September 9 the full triumvirate held a press conference and formally published two decrees: one assigned Minh powers that made him de facto Chief of State with responsibility for convoking the High National Council (i.e., the council of personalities called for by Khanh), the other established the High National Council and charged it with drafting a provisional charter and organizing a provisional national assembly.

On September 13, dissatisfied junior ARVN officers,

mostly Northern Catholics, mounted an unsuccessful coup against the existing military leadership. Deeply disturbed by this further dissension among the armed forces and by the picture of political instability it displayed, the United States strongly expressed its disapproval of the coup leaders' actions and its unqualified support for the established process of transition to civilian government. Secretary Rusk instructed Taylor to make the "strongest private representations to all key personalities ... that there not be internecine war within South Vietnamese armed forces ..., that latest events had created an appalling impression abroad ..., and that the United States has not provided massive assistance to South Viet-Nam ... in order to subsidize continuing quarrels among South Vietnamese leaders." The Secretary also wished it noted that "... General Minh should be permitted to continue with his task of constituting a council of representatives ... which can get to work on the constitution of a government ... In this preparatory stage we believe the triumvirate with Prime Minister Khanh, General Minh and General Khiem should

continue to direct affairs..." The Secretary voiced total disapproval of the coup group and said that "US support for the GVN is based on the triumvirate and its efforts to bring about a broadly-based and effective government." ^{31/}

Taylor, who had just returned from a consultation trip to Washington, met Khanh and Minh September 14 and told them the consensus in Washington was that by far the greatest problem facing South Viet-Nam was the formation of the provisional government. He noted the previous day's events raised even more serious doubts in the United States about the reliability of our Vietnamese ally, and said "it would be a mistake to count indefinitely on unlimited US support" in these circumstances. Khanh and Minh said they understood the seriousness of the situation and stated their intention to push ahead with their plans for establishing the provisional government. ^{32/}

^{31/} Department of State Telegram 654, September 13, 1964 (~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

^{32/} From Saigon, Telegram 857, September 14, 1964 (~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

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Taylor and the Mission also communicated the Secretary's position to other high GVN officials, civilian politicians, military officers, religious leaders, and local press representatives in the next few days. The coup was unsuccessful, at least partly because of US disapproval, and the triumvirate was able to continue toward greater civilian rule as planned. On September 26, Minh presented the High National Council to the nation, and the group began its deliberations.

At this time the US Mission had begun a reassessment of Khanh's capabilities. Noting that US support had helped sustain him in power during the critical preceding two months, Taylor raised the question whether he was worth such support now. Reviewing Khanh's assets and liabilities and the current political scene in Saigon, Taylor concluded that the United States should continue first of all to press for a satisfactory solution by way of the High National Council, i.e., establishment of a prime ministerial rather than a presidential system in which Khanh could retain leadership of the military but not be the nation's chief executive. Taylor also recommended that the United States be prepared

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"to drop Khanh if he gets into irreparable trouble" in the transition period and view Minh "as a short-term substitute for Khanh." 33/

Through most of October, the Mission consulted closely with the High National Council on the form of a new government and in assuring there was adequate communication between the various political groupings, -- i.e., the military, the religious groups, and the Council itself. On October 11, Taylor stressed to the Council the necessity for a strong and stable government which would endure for a considerable period, the need for close cooperation between the civilian and the military, and the fact that the United States had no preconceived notions as to particular forms of government or personalities. Taylor noted the Council was more cohesive and practical-minded than he had originally expected, and was thinking in terms of a prime ministerial system under a Chief

33/ From Saigon, Telegram 972, September 28, 1964
(~~TOP SECRET - EXDIS~~).

of State.^{34/} On October 12, Taylor discussed the Council's ideas with Khanh, who was generally in agreement. In discussing personalities involved, Taylor noted his preference for a civilian prime minister and a role for both Khanh and Minh, one as Commander-in-Chief of RVNAF and the other as Chief of State or vice-versa. Khanh stated that he preferred the military role.^{35/}

The Department commented that Khanh should play a leading role in the new GVN, "ideally as chief executive..." or at least "... as leader of Army with co-equal position to civilians in a government." The Department said "it should be made clear that the United States does not support Minh as powerful chief executive."^{36/} Taylor answered that he believed the Mission had successfully persuaded the Council

^{34/} From Saigon, Telegram 1108, October 12, 1964
~~(SECRET - LIMDIS)~~

^{35/} From Saigon 1109, October 12, 1964
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^{36/} Department of State Telegram 859, October 18, 1964 ~~(TOP SECRET - EXDIS)~~

toward an acceptable arrangement which would place Minh in the figurehead position of Chief of State and leave the real power to be exercised by the Prime Minister (a civilian as yet unknown) and the Commander-in-Chief of the RVNAF, i.e., Khanh. Taylor believed this was preferable to trying to retain Khanh in his existing role as Prime Minister. Taylor also noted the inherent difficulties a dual military-civilian system might entail, and he stated his intention to work for a civilian prime minister "with strong and well-defined powers with Khanh as Commander-in-Chief and perhaps also Minister of Defense or Deputy Prime Minister for Pacification." 37/

The High National Council published its provisional Charter on October 20, 1964. It provided for three branches of government, with separation of powers and several checks and balances to protect against the ascendancy of any one of the branches; however, it did not resolve completely the

37/ From Saigon, Telegram 1183, October 19, 1964
~~(TOP SECRET - EXDIS)~~

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problem of military vs. civilian control, leaving unclear certain powers regarding control of the armed forces. Unable to complete the task of choosing a new national assembly by the October 27 deadline, the Council assigned to itself provisional legislative powers. On October 24, the Council chose its chairman, Phan Khac Suu, to become Viet-Nam's first Chief of State under the Provisional Charter. The triumvirate relinquished governmental control to him on October 26, and Suu in turn named Saigon Mayor Tran Van Huong as Prime Minister. Huong was confirmed by the High National Council on October 31. The transition to a new GVN had been accomplished on schedule, with an essentially civilian government installed on the most legitimate constitutional basis since the overthrow of Diem almost exactly a year earlier.

5. US Support for Civilian Government

The Huong Government faced two serious problems:

(1) overcoming political opposition which quickly developed against the new GVN on the part of several minor "out" political figures and Buddhist and student groups; and (2) maintaining the support of the military leadership and sufficient control over it to be able to govern effectively. The United States, determined to see the new civilian government succeed in restoring political stability so that further measures to prosecute the war could be undertaken, supported Huong fully in his attempts to deal with these problems.

On November 9, when Huong asked him whether further actions against the North were contemplated, Taylor replied "... reciprocal responsibilities were involved. On the GVN side it was essential that a stable government be established capable of directing the affairs of the nation ... Should his government demonstrate that it is capable of achieving satisfactory degree of governmental stability and effectiveness, a wider range of possibilities would undoubtedly be

open for discussion. In the meantime he could count on continued US support." 38/

The opposition elements mounted anti-demonstrations in Saigon and also attempted to press their demands on Chief of State Suu, the High National Council, and within the military. When demonstrations in Saigon threatened disorder in late November, Huong cracked down firmly on the demonstrators. Concerned about the disruption further changes could cause and unimpressed with the character and sincerity of the opposition, the United States made clear to Suu, the Council, the military, and political leaders of various groups that the United States backed Huong's action and his position as the legally-chosen head of the new civilian government.

On November 25, Deputy Ambassador Johnson told Suu "that Huong was Suu's appointee and that Suu, Huong, and the High National Council must function as a team." He stressed to Suu that discussions were getting under way in Washington to

38/ From Saigon, Telegram 1452, November 10, 1964
~~(SECRET - EXDIS)~~.

determine fundamental decisions, on future US policy toward Viet-Nam, and said "I could give no assurance of outcome if, as result of few noisy minority elements, government overthrown before it even had opportunity to get to work." When Suu asked whether changes should be made in the government, Johnson replied "... there was in our view no reason to change the government. On the contrary the government should be supported by all concerned." ^{39/} Johnson also conveyed the same message to key Council members. ^{40/}

Strain between the civilian and military leadership also developed early in the Huong regime. Huong suspected Khanh of wishing to undermine the new civilian government and re-establish himself in power. Huong also suspected Khanh was at least partly behind some of the groups in violent opposition to the GVN. Other military leaders were also distrustful of the civilians' ability to cope with the political

^{39/} From Saigon, Telegram 1635, November 25, 1964
~~(SECRET - LIMDIS)~~.

^{40/} Ibid.

disturbances, and some felt Huong was too inflexible in dealing with opposition elements, particularly the Buddhists. US efforts were devoted to getting the army to participate responsibility in the legal civilian government and cooperate with it rather than staying apart from it and working separately outside of it.

In early November, Khanh had pushed through certain decrees reorganizing the RVNAF High Command and giving the armed forces wide separate powers over mobilization of resources and, in effect, by-passing much of the civilian GVN structure. Taylor persuaded Khanh to modify the decrees somewhat and reemphasized the US desire to see closer military-civilian cooperation. On November 10, he told Khanh "The army as the military arm of the government was an organic part of it and not something that could be detached... The military leaders should share a sense of responsibility and lend their encouragement and support to the inexperienced civilian ministers now faced with a herculean task." ^{41/}

^{41/} From Saigon, Telegram 1460, November 10, 1964
(~~SECRET - EXDIS~~)

During this period the United States also began to encourage the Vietnamese in development of permanent political institutions. The Embassy felt some caution was necessary in encouraging elections of a National Assembly too soon, but concluded that a fully-elected Assembly was preferable to an appointed or partially-appointed one. The Embassy advised the High National Council, whose task it was to establish the Assembly and write an electoral law for it, along these lines.^{42/}

In early December after his return from another consultation trip to Washington, Taylor again reaffirmed US support for the transition to civilian government and US concern about continuing political instability in South Viet-Nam. He reported he had told all significant Vietnamese leaders of US "admiration for orderly course ... in selecting and installing civilian government and US respect

^{42/} From Saigon, Telegram 1563, November 20, 1964
~~(CONFIDENTIAL - EXDIS)~~

for Prime Minister Huong and his government." He also expressed US dismay that the GVN was under attack "by critics of uncertain motivation." He stated "My government ... is more convinced than ever that political stability is essential for effective use of existing levels of US assistance and is indispensable to any consideration of any further increase in its commitments." ^{43/}

^{43/} From Saigon, Telegram 1750, December 8, 1964
~~(CONFIDENTIAL - LIMDIS)~~

6. Military-Civilian Conflict: Resumption of Military Primacy

The prospects for increased political stability and further progress toward legitimate constitutional government were rudely set back on the night of December 19-20, when the armed forces unilaterally dissolved the High National Council and arrested most of its members. The immediate cause was the Council's attempt to prevent the involuntary retirement of 40 older generals and colonels, including General Minh, as proposed by Khanh and the younger generals. The latter considered the Council's position an unacceptable challenge to the military's power, and the action reopened wide the basic civil-military split which had been kept more or less below the surface since the previous September.

The United States was profoundly disturbed over this latest setback to South Viet-Nam's political viability and took a strong position against the military's action. Taylor reported that the generals had "felt no reluctance in acting without consultation with US representatives and in disregarding our advice on important matters once we became

aware of developments ... Perhaps most serious of all is the deliberate disregard of the message which I brought from Washington... that continued and increased US aid for South Viet-Nam depended upon governmental stability and evidence of national unity." 44/

On the morning of December 20, Taylor met with Generals Ky, Thieu, Thi and Admiral Cang. He reported to the Department "I very forcefully expressed my disappointment in the action they had taken, making it clear they had jeopardized US support in everything they had been seeking and asked for their explanations." Ky explained their actions as having been designed to remove disruptive elements in the High National Council and to strengthen unity. Taylor pointed out that they had usurped power, and the world would see this simply as a military coup. If Huong and Suu were to remain in office, they would be viewed only as military puppets. He strongly urged that they seek some way to annul the dissolution of the High National Council and that they cancel their

44/ From Saigon, Telegram 1877, December 20, 1964
~~(SECRET - EXDIS)~~.

press conference scheduled for that afternoon. ^{45/} However, the generals held their press conference as scheduled, at which General Thi announced the dissolution of the High National Council.

That evening, Taylor and Johnson called on Huong, who at that point was prepared to accept the military's actions as a fait accompli. After they had pointed out to Huong some of the implications, however, he appeared convinced of the need of his gaining "some kind of understanding with the military before agreeing to remain in office." ^{46/} Taylor suggested four conditions Huong should exact as a price for staying in office: (1) he should not accept the legality of the military's decree purporting to dissolve the High National Council; (2) he should agree to revamp the membership of the High National Council or to accept an analogous committee under a different name; (3) the military should release immediately to the custody of the government all prisoners

^{45/} From Saigon, Telegram 1870, December 20, 1964
~~(CONFIDENTIAL - EXDIS)~~.

^{46/} From Saigon, Telegram 1877, December 20, 1964
~~(SECRET - EXDIS)~~.

they had taken; and (4) there should be a specific undertaking by the military to support his government, including a willingness to participate and share responsibility in it. Taylor also told Huong to "say bluntly to Khanh and the military that we have lost confidence in either a true military dictatorship or a military dictatorship behind the facade of a civilian government and under such circumstances there was real doubt the US Government could continue to support the GVN."^{47/}

The following morning, Taylor and Johnson told Khanh that because of the military's action, "the US Government would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to cooperate under these circumstances." Taylor told Khanh that because he took responsibility for what the generals had done, "he had lost my confidence."^{48/} Khanh then asked the Ambassador if he should retire from his present position, and Taylor

^{47/} From Saigon, Telegram 1874, December 20, 1964
(~~CONFIDENTIAL - EXDIS~~)

^{48/} From Saigon, Telegram 1881, December 21, 1964
(~~TOP SECRET - EXDIS~~).

replied that he should. In discussing various courses which Khanh might take, Taylor said Khanh might remain if the Prime Minister so desired and if the military were to accept certain conditions such as the withdrawal of their illegal decree dissolving the High National Council, the transfer of their political prisoners to the government, and the acceptance of responsibility for and participation in the Huong Government.^{49/}

The Department backed Taylor's belief that Huong's position must be strengthened and the military brought back into line.^{50/} As possible leverage against the generals, the Department suggested that the United States let it be known it was withholding approval of all pending United States assistance actions. In addition, several steps aimed specifically at the military were suggested, such as suspending certain US-directed operations, expressing US dissatisfaction through the advisor network, and temporarily

^{49/} From Saigon, Telegram 1881, December 21, 1964
(~~TOP SECRET - EXDIS~~).

^{50/} Department of State Telegram 1319, December 21, 1964 (~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

suspending non-crucial logistical airlifts. The Department, however, rejected cutting essential POL and direct military supplies, as well as suspending or interrupting the Commercial Import Program. Both these actions, it was felt, would have adverse effects since they would primarily affect civilian confidence in the Huong Government.^{51/}

On December 23, Huong reported to Taylor and Johnson that Khanh was willing to accept all conditions except the most important -- the nullification of the military's action in abolishing the High National Council. Huong, Vien and Suu had agreed to reject Khanh's terms even though the government might fall as a consequence. As an assurance of American support, Taylor gave Huong a US statement which in part said: "As we have repeatedly made clear, a duly constituted government exercising full power on the basis of national unity, and without improper interference from any group, is the essential condition for a successful prosecution

^{51/} Department of State Telegram 1320,
December 21, 1964 (~~TOP SECRET - EXDIS~~).

of the effort to defeat the Viet Cong and is the basis of US support for that effort.^{52/}

In response to indications that General Khanh was mounting an anti-American, anti-Taylor campaign and intended to pressure Huong into asking for Ambassador Taylor's removal, the Department urged that an effort be made to "defuse the issue of personality" and keep in the foreground the basic issue of effective unity in South Viet-Nam.^{53/} The Department instructed Taylor that if Huong were presented by the military with a demand to declare him (Taylor) persona non grata, he was to advise Huong that as Ambassador he had "been acting with the full support of the United States Government and that any acceptance of such a demand or hesitation in rejecting it would make it virtually impossible for the United States to continue to support the GVN effort." If necessary, he was to inform Huong that he was giving this advice on direct orders of the President. If Huong were to

^{52/} Department of State Telegram 1328, December 22, 1964.

^{53/} Department of State Telegram 1346, December 24, 1964 ~~(TOP SECRET - EXDIS)~~.

insist on proceeding, the Embassy was instructed to ask if the GVN desired to break relations and if so how they estimated their capability to proceed without US support. If Ky and the other generals were unaware of the policy line Taylor had brought back from Washington, this should be used with them now to offset any impression of American negativity and to bring them around.^{54/}

On December 25, Taylor replied "Responsible leaders of GVN do not desire to break relations with the United States and know they cannot win without us. However, they cannot control generals who for the moment seem completely irresponsible." Further, "Huong has neither moral nor physical stamina to undertake ... assignment" of personally taking on the military singlehandedly. The Ambassador pointed out that Ky and the other generals were thoroughly aware of the US policy line regarding additional US actions and support, which he had conveyed to them on December 8. Taylor recommended as a course of action that instead of pressing Huong

^{54/} Department of State Telegram 1347, December 24, 1964 (~~TOP SECRET - EXDIS~~).

to reject immediately Khanh's demands for ousting him (Taylor), an ad hoc committee consisting of a representative of the US Embassy, a representative of Huong, and a representative of General Khanh be set up to look into the complaints of the generals.^{55/} The Department agreed with this proposal, but felt the committee should discuss "all possible sources of misunderstanding" and not merely "complaints of generals." The United States must focus on the point that the military role must be related to national unity in South Viet-Nam and could not be exercised to undermine the government's power.^{56/}

In the meantime, the United States moved to undercut Khanh's extreme stand by explaining the US position directly to his military colleagues. General Throckmorton, Deputy Commander of MACV, called on Generals Ky and Thieu and on Admiral Cang on Christmas Day to allay any misunderstandings

^{55/} From Saigon, Telegram 1939, December 25, 1964
~~(TOP SECRET - EXDIS).~~

^{56/} Department of State Telegram 1355, December 25, 1964 ~~(TOP SECRET - EXDIS).~~

which might have arisen as a result of their meeting with Taylor on December 20. He also stated that Taylor had not demanded that Khanh leave the country but had only replied positively to Khanh's own suggestion. Throckmorton said the United States was not trying to replace Khanh with Minh, and Taylor would be willing to meet with the generals to clear up any misunderstanding. Finally, he noted that the military's demand that action be taken against Taylor left Huong and Suu only the options of resigning or declaring the Ambassador persona non grata -- an action which would make it virtually impossible for the United States to continue its support. Ky's reaction was that Throckmorton's statements strengthened his suspicions that Khanh had lied to the Generals. Thieu said his misunderstandings had been clarified and that he felt that meetings should be arranged between Taylor and Khanh, and Taylor and the generals.^{57/}

^{57/} From Saigon, Telegram 1955, December 26, 1964
~~(SECRET - EXDIS)~~.

On December 26, Taylor and Johnson met with Huong and suggested that an ad hoc deputies group be appointed to discuss the problem. Huong with "visible eagerness" said he would discuss such a group with Suu and Vien. He also asked what guarantee of US support he could count on if Khanh were to move in and take over; to this the Ambassador said that he personally doubted the US Government would feel it could cooperate with a military government headed by Khanh, and asked whether this were the kind of assurance he would like to have. Huong replied that he was not asking for such an assurance at this time. Taylor suggested to the Department that it consider authorizing him, if Huong did request some assurances, to state "The US Government would find it impossible to cooperate with any government headed or controlled by General Khanh." ^{58/}

By December 28, the misunderstanding between Khanh and the generals and Taylor seemed to be abating. The ad hoc committee of deputies made up of Deputy Premier Oanh,

^{58/} From Saigon, Telegram 1952, December 26, 1964
(~~TOP SECRET - EXDIS~~).

General Thieu, Admiral Cang and Deputy Ambassador Johnson, met on December 30 to discuss the December 20 meeting Taylor had with the four generals and his December 21 meeting with Khanh. At the instance of Oanh and Thieu the question of working out a solution to the governmental crisis arising from the military's actions was also added to the agenda.

Johnson was able to explain Taylor's disappointment with the general's action of December 20; and that matter was con-

sidered-closed. On the governmental question, Johnson explained the rationale of the US position and the problems it presented for us in our cooperation with Viet-Nam. He stressed that the United States did not seek to dictate what Viet-Nam should do and did not allege there was any single answer, "although all we had been able to think of was a reversal of the dissolution of the High National Council either by the military itself or by the military acquiescing in a statement by the government not recognizing the legality of the December 20 action."^{59/}

^{59/} From Saigon, Telegram 1999, December 30, 1964 (~~SECRET~~ - ~~EXDIS~~).

While Taylor was encouraged by the ad hoc deputies' meeting, he still foresaw serious governmental crisis until the issue -- "fundamental question of whether armed forces are to represent focus of political power outside civil government or are ready to subordinate themselves to government as its military arm" -- was decided.^{60/}

On December 31, Taylor in contemplating the possible course of future political events in South Viet-Nam, said that if the outcome were a military government headed by Khanh, "I would feel that it would be impossible for us to do business with it." The US effort should be toward effecting the best possible compromise. If a military government with Khanh at the head were to emerge, however, Taylor suggested a US disengagement from South Viet-Nam, the withdrawal of the bulk of American advisors, the reduction of MACV to the status of a MAAG and USOM to an economic-budgetary advisory group; America would continue to accept responsibility for the air and maritime defense of South

^{60/} From Saigon, Telegram 2000, December 31, 1964 (~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

Viet-Nam. Phase II (air attacks on the DRV) might be used to dampen further terrorist attacks, to signal Hanoi and to raise dejected spirits in South Viet-Nam.^{61/}

On January 9, Johnson met with Khanh to get his views on three sets of problems: (1) the outlook for the stability and effectiveness of the government; (2) the problem that had been created for the American public by the reports of the anti-American campaign of Khanh and the generals; and (3) the impression in the United States that Khanh and the generals were more interested in personal politicking than in fighting the war. Johnson pointed out that by letting the military and the government constitute two distinct entities, Khanh merely perpetuated the basic situation leading up to the December 20 coup. On Points 2 and 3, Khanh protested at great length his respect and admiration for the United States for all it had done for Viet-Nam and his conviction that Viet-Nam had no future without the United States. He had

^{61/} From Saigon, Telegram 2010, December 31, 1964
~~(TOP SECRET - EXDIS)~~

never said anything against the United States, but "if the United States is badly represented here, that is another thing."^{62/}

On January 11, the Department told the Embassy that chances appeared good that Khanh would soon take over the government, either directly or indirectly. The Embassy was asked to avoid as much as possible any action which might be seen as committing the United States one way or another. Specifically, the Embassy was cautioned to take no early initiatives to see Khanh, letting him come to us if he wanted to; but also doing nothing to change the pattern of working relations at all levels until the situation clarified.^{63/}

Taylor, on January 16, reported the main thrust of the Embassy's recent efforts were on two fronts: (1) to attempt to integrate the military into the government in a manner which gives them a sense of participation and responsibility

^{62/} From Saigon, Telegram 2102, January 9, 1965
~~(SECRET - LIMDIS)~~.

^{63/} Department of State Telegram 1436, January 11, 1965 ~~(SECRET - EXDIS)~~.

but which does not give them control or veto over civilian authority; and (2) to make the US position re political stability clear to all political groups. The best course, Taylor felt, would be to continue along these lines and seek to contain Khanh's ambitions.^{64/}

On January 27, Huong and Suu were removed from office by the military. Suu told Taylor the next day that he had not resigned (as had been announced) but had been overthrown; however, he would be willing to stay on temporarily.^{65/}

In the days following Huong and Suu's removal, the Embassy received reports of the military's strong dissatisfaction with Khanh's political maneuvers and its deep concern over his apparent desire to install himself as Chief of State.^{66/} The Embassy contacted General Ky to convey to him and the generals the fact that the United States was in no way

^{64/} From Saigon, Telegram 2166, January 16, 1965
(~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

^{65/} From Saigon, Telegram 2330, January 28, 1965
(~~CONFIDENTIAL - EXDIS~~).

^{66/} From Saigon, Telegram 2386, February 3, 1965
(~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

propping up General Khanh or backing him in any fashion; and that the United States shared with him (Ky) and his colleagues their concern about the situation.^{67/}

In discussing the formation of a new government, the Department said that any government which had any hope of success must take into account both the military and the Buddhists, and cautioned the Embassy against "once again getting into the position of trying to shore up a government besieged by both military and Buddhists."^{68/} The Embassy pointed out that while the military and Buddhist Institute leaders (not Buddhists in general) were the predominant elements politically, the military was much more important since the Buddhist Institute's strength outside the Hue area was essentially superficial. The Embassy in the past had never tried to shore up any government attacked by both these elements. The primary US objective should be

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^{67/} From Saigon, Telegram 2389, February 3, 1965
~~(SECRET - LINDIS)~~

^{68/} Department of State Telegram 1677, February 10, 1965
~~(SECRET - LINDIS)~~

to encourage the formation of a government headed by a resolute Prime Minister, civilian or military, who has the full support of the armed forces and the will to maintain order. However, the United States should not encourage the formation of a government which was unnecessarily provocative to the Buddhist Institute. ^{69/}

The unstable situation was resolved on February 16-17, when Suu was designated as Chief of State and Phan Huy Quat as Prime Minister by the Armed Forces Council (a body set up by the younger generals just prior to taking action against the High National Council on December 20). In its Declaration No. 4 of February 16, the AFC noted its continued "respect for the October 29 provisional charter," established a Military-Civilian Council as a "transitional legislative body," and promised to convene a national congress at some future date. It also said the AFC would "return to its military position" once the new executive

^{69/} From Saigon, Telegram 2501, February 11, 1965 (~~SECRET - EXDIS~~).

and legislative was set up but, would also "act as intermediary whenever necessary in order to preserve equilibrium until there is a government elected directly by the people."

While the outward appearance of civilian government was thus preserved, the events of December and January proved that the military was still the predominant political element in the country. However, as a result of these events the military leadership had finally achieved a relative degree of unity among themselves for the first time since Diem's overthrow. On February 20, the AFC voted no-confidence in Khanh, and on February 25, he was given a "roving Ambassadorship" and sent out of the country. Minh had been similarly sent out in late October and Khiem had already been assigned to Washington as Ambassador since November. The "young turk" generals who remained and assumed full control of the RVNAF were a relatively cohesive and still politically-uncommitted group.

7. The Quat Government

The reemergence of military predominance in the political field coincided with new US-GVN moves to step up the war, beginning with the launching of regular air strikes over North Viet-Nam in early February. These moves tended to overshadow the political situation and divert US attention somewhat, but they also helped stabilize the political atmosphere within South Viet-Nam at least temporarily. An abortive coup by certain younger (mostly Catholic) officers on February 19 was quickly crushed; the military reaffirmed its support for Suu and Quat and remained relatively in the background of South Vietnamese politics for several months thereafter.

The Embassy assessed the new Quat regime as having potential, but noted it was dominated by Northern and Central Vietnamese and pro-Tri Quang Buddhists, as well as being subject to military interference. The US Mission spokesman said on February 16 "We welcome end of period of interim government and look forward to working closely with new

government headed by Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat." 70/

The United States also continued its efforts to encourage development of more permanent political institutions. On February 19, Taylor discussed with Deputy Premier Tran Van Tuyen the prospect of early elections. Tuyen said the GVN still had the intention to convoke a national assembly through elections at a fairly early date; in the meantime, the National Legislative Council (formerly Military-Civilian Council) had full legislative powers. Tuyen also indicated the GVN would hold municipal elections. 71/

During March the NLC devoted most of its discussions to the question of an elected national congress, whose first task would be to draft a constitution. On May 27, NLC President Pham Xuan Chieu announced the NLC would promulgate an election law sometime in June and the elections themselves would be held in September or October. On May 30, the promised elections for municipal and provincial councils were successfully held; some 3.4 million people, or 74 percent of the

70/ From Saigon, Telegram 2614, February 16, 1965
(CONFIDENTIAL).

71/ From Saigon, Telegram 2660, February 19, 1965
(CONFIDENTIAL - LIMDIS).

registered voters, cast ballots for these bodies, which were largely advisory but also were given certain review powers over the actions of local GVN administrators.

Quat and the military also were able to take a step back toward civilian government. On May 6, the Armed Forces Council announced its dissolution, stating its mission of stabilizing the political situation had been accomplished and expressing confidence in the Quat Government. At the same time, Quat also moved to keep the military engaged in the government by reorganizing the military command to reduce the powers of the Commander-in-Chief and expand those of the Ministry of Defense. In this he had the advice and support of Taylor and Westmoreland.^{72/}

Despite its good relations with the military, the Quat Government was unable to overcome prevailing regional and religious divisions in the body politic. In late May a crisis developed when Quat's attempt to replace two ministers

^{72/} From Saigon, Telegram 3715, May 10, 1965
(~~SECRET - LIMDIS~~).

in his cabinet was thwarted by Chief of State Suu. The immediate issue was the question of the constitutional powers of each man, but the basic difficulty arose from increasing Catholic and Southern opposition to Quat and his cabinet. Taylor noted that Suu was "a willing tool" of Quat's opposition, and Taylor basically supported Quat's right to name or change his own ministers. Taylor made this point to several political figures, including Interior Minister Nguyen Hoa Hiep, one of the ministers involved. He noted to Hiep his regret that "this scandal had been raised at this time," pointing out it would be seen abroad as "one more evidence of political instability in country." 73/

Neither Quat, the military, or the National Legislative Council were able to resolve the issue. On June 12, Suu -- on behalf of himself, Quat, and the NLC -- announced that the three elements of civilian authority had handed back to the armed forces all power and authority in Viet-Nam. It was also made clear that the provisional charter of October 20, 1965, was rescinded and the status of the GVN had reverted to what it was just after Diem was overthrown.

73/ From Saigon, Telegram 3885, May 25, 1965 (~~SECRET~~).

8. Ky Government, and Plans for Restoration of Constitutional Government

The younger generals, disillusioned with civilian failures to achieve political unity and stability, decided to undertake full responsibility themselves for leadership of the GVN. In a meeting with Taylor June 16, Generals Thieu and Ky outlined their plans for a new military government. Thieu said such a government would remain for 6 months to a year, after which consideration could be given to returning the government to civilian hands. Taylor mentioned the desirability of holding out the prospect for national elections, to provide a goal for politicians who might otherwise spend their full time in opposition. Thieu and Ky replied they had this in mind.^{74/}

The government of Brigadier General Nguyen Cao Ky was installed on June 20, 1965. According to the Provisional Charter of June 19, from which it drew its mandate, the Ky Government was to be only temporary pending creation of a

^{74/} From Saigon, Telegram 4221, June 16, 1965
~~(SECRET - LIMDIS)~~.

civilian, constitutional regime. In his first address as Premier on June 20, Ky set forth an ambitious program of 26 points, one of which was a specific commitment to return South Viet-Nam to constitutional rule as soon as possible. In succeeding months there was lively public interest in the revival of constitutional processes, and some civilian political pressure on the GVN to bring it about forthwith. Perhaps the most noteworthy example of this came in October 1965 during a nation-wide conference of province chiefs and provincial council chairmen organized by the government. The council chairmen, elected in May 1965, met in informal seminar at the home of Dr. Phan Quang Dan of Gia Dinh Province to discuss prospects for a return to constitutional government. Following their meeting, the councillors issued a joint statement exhorting the GVN to move ahead more rapidly in this transition process.

In late 1965 the Ky Government developed plans for a staged transition from military to constitutional government. The first step in this sequence, described by Ky in a "state of the nation" address following the close of the

2nd Armed Forces Congress on January 15, 1966, was to be the creation of an appointive council to draft a constitution. The council's draft would then be discussed in seminars held throughout the country in which "municipal and provincial councilmen, members of political parties, trade union members and students" would offer their views. When a consensus had been reached in this manner, a new draft would be prepared which would be submitted to the voters in a popular referendum in October 1966. The election of a constitutional government would then follow in 1967.

General Pham Xuan Chieu, Secretary-General of the National Leadership Committee (Directorate), was given the responsibility for drawing up a list of civilian politicians to serve on the Advisory Council and was to be the main link between the Council and the Directorate. Chieu and the Directorate envisioned a Council of approximately eighty members, including such men as Revolutionary Dai Viet leader Ha Thuc Ky, Cao Dai Nguyen Van Thanh, and Hoa Hao Socialist Phan Ba Cam.

9. Honolulu Conference, and US Promotion of Constitutionalism

President Johnson met with Chief of State Thieu and Prime Minister Ky in Honolulu February 7 and 8, 1966, for a general review of the situation and to outline new priorities and programs in both military and non-military areas. During the course of the meeting, the President reaffirmed the US determination to assist South Viet-Nam to defend itself militarily. However, the focus of Honolulu was on non-military aspects of the conflict -- pacification, economic stabilization and political development. The position of the United States with regard to the democratization process to be undertaken by the GVN was presented in confidential sessions of the conference, and the commitment of both governments to its attainment was set forth in the Declaration of Honolulu issued at the conclusion of the conference.

In talking points used by President Johnson in his conversations with Thieu and Ky, the President noted the importance of governments' achieving "a wide measure of popular consensus" if they were to govern effectively. The

President further noted GVN plans for drafting a constitution, holding a referendum on it, and organizing national elections, which he described as "major moves forward."

At the same time he cautioned that "... the problem is to do this without running too serious risks of Communist exploitation of weakness and division." The President stressed the importance of implementation by the GVN of its political development program, during a private conversation with Generals Thieu and Ky on February 7. He also encouraged Ky to spend more time in the countryside "acting like a politician instead of just a general." ^{75/} Secretary Rusk laid similar emphasis on the importance of the GVN democratization program in his private meetings with Foreign Minister Tran Van Do.

In the Declaration of Honolulu, the GVN pledged itself, inter alia, to "build true democracy for our land and our people." In particular, the GVN committed itself: "to

^{75/} Memorandum from Bill Moyers, the White House, to U. Alexis Johnson, February 16, 1966
~~(SECRET - EXDIS)~~

formulate a democratic constitution in the months ahead, including an electoral law; to take that constitution to our people for discussion and modification; to seek its ratification by secret ballot; to create, on the basis of elections rooted in that constitution, an elected government." For its part, the United States, "pledged to the principles of the self-determination of peoples, and of government by the consent of the governed... therefore gives its full support to the purpose of free elections proclaimed by the Government of South Viet-Nam..."

These commitments were recorded in somewhat more specific terms in a resume of the conference proceedings prepared by the Department of State and dated February 23, 1966. It noted the "consensus" of the two governments with regard to political development, which was that "The GVN affirmed its intention to proceed with the building of democracy and encouraging a widened and more active popular participation in and contribution to this process. The United States affirmed its support for free elections." The report also noted "further actions" necessary, based on

specific discussions involving both Vietnamese and US representatives. The GVN undertook the responsibility for carrying out these actions, and various US Government agencies were charged with rendering assistance or monitoring GVN efforts. The "further actions" in the field of political development were as follows:

The GVN will appoint an advisory council consisting of 80 members selected from a cross-section of society and all regions of the country. Appointment will be made by the end of February. (Responsibility: GVN, US Embassy to monitor.)

Advisory Council will draft a constitution, which will be taken to the people for discussion and modification and submitted to a referendum in late 1966. (Responsibility: GVN, US Embassy.)

The Council will also discuss electoral laws and political party formation. On the basis of elections, rooted in the constitution, the GVN will create an elected government. (Responsibility: GVN, US Embassy.)

The report also charged Ambassador Lodge with carrying on a dialogue with the GVN on this subject, and noted that the President "made it clear we are not pushing the GVN to move more quickly than would be wise..." in this process.

Similar outlines of agreed policy and "further action" needed were prepared for all areas discussed at Honolulu. Periodic progress reports were to be submitted to Washington by the US Mission, describing accomplishments in each area. (Note: Political development was one of 14 separate items of discussion at Honolulu. Others included "Diplomatic Track," Military Program, Free World Assistance, Rural Construction, and Health.) 76/

The United States maintained an active interest in the "democracy-building" program of the GVN in the weeks following Honolulu. The Department was generally satisfied with the steps taken or contemplated by the GVN in the formation of the Advisory Council, expressing reservations only with regard to the proposed composition of that Council. The Department was concerned, however, at the reluctance of the Directorate to include provincial council members, at that time the only elected officials in South

76/ Honolulu Meeting: Record of Conclusions and Decisions for Further Action, February 23, 1966 (~~SECRET~~).

Viet-Nam, in the Advisory Council. In a message to the Embassy on February 12, 1966, the Department expressed the hope that provincial councilmen could be included, or at least "that adequate provision would be made for regular Advisory Council consultation with provincial councils." It suggested that the Embassy approach the Directorate on this matter.^{77/} On February 22, the Department also expressed concern at indications that GVN leaders intended to exclude "dissenters" such as leftist Catholic Nguyen Van Trung from the Council. While recognizing that "the GVN must embark on political development very carefully and deliberately in face of wideapread VC penetration and subversion of country...if VC are to be successfully challenged politically, believe generals must come to understand that they will be obliged to tolerate and even encourage participation of broader political spectrum than in past." Admission of a limited number of dissenters, the Department continued,

^{77/} Department of State Telegram 2378
~~(CONFIDENTIAL)~~.

"could conceivably begin to channel dissent in constructive way." ^{78/} Ambassador Lodge did not fully share the Department's view regarding provincial councilmen, arguing that the councilmen, elected to fulfill purely local responsibilities, would not necessarily be fitted for the broader task of constitution drafting. Eventually, however, provincial councilmen were allowed to play a major role in the steps leading to a constitutional convention.

^{78/} Department of State Telegram 2481
~~(CONFIDENTIAL)~~.

10. The Buddhist "Struggle" of 1966; Alteration of GVN Plan for Democracy-Building

The orderly sequence outlined at Honolulu for a return to constitutional government -- as well as GVN programs in areas other than political development -- were to be severely disrupted and changed. The removal of General Nguyen Chanh Thi as I Corps Commander on March 10, 1966, precipitated an attempt by Buddhist militants to bring down the Thieu-Ky Government. The "struggle movement" failed in its major objective, to overthrow Thieu and Ky, but generated sufficient heat to keep the GVN fully occupied for the next three months and to force a change in the manner in which the GVN moved toward constitutionalism. One Buddhist demand, though not their primary goal, was the immediate election of a constitutional assembly. The GVN eventually agreed to this, and a Constituent Assembly was elected in September 1966. (The militant Buddhists, however, did not participate in that election, charging that any election held while Thieu and Ky were in office would be rigged.)

Although the transition toward constitutional government was telescoped in this manner by Buddhist pressure, it was not, as has been seen, originated by that pressure.

a. The Removal of General Thi

Prime Minister Ky notified Ambassador Lodge on March 9 of his intention to remove Thi from I Corps. In Ky's view, Thi was deliberately insubordinate; in effect, one-fourth of the country was exempt from government control. Ky met with the Directorate generals on the morning of March 9 and asked them to take appropriate steps for the removal of Thi. If they chose not to do so, Ky would go back to the Air Force and someone else could be Prime Minister. The generals wanted to know Lodge's views on the matter before making their decision. In reply, Lodge told Ky that "...as US Ambassador, I could not, of course, interfere in what was essentially an internal affair,...and for the record I could not say much more than that the United States Government very much desired the stability of the Government of Viet-Nam which we regarded as indispensable to successful prosecution of the war."

Ky then asked for Lodge's comments off the record and as a friend. Lodge thereupon told Ky that, in view of the importance of this issue, "it was absolutely indispensable that every step be carefully prepared so that there could be no possible hitch and that General Ky would not stumble and fall flat on his face." He suggested that Ky prepare a thoroughly documented legal case against Thi, proving his insubordination. Lodge also asked Ky whether he could be certain that the removal would take place smoothly, that a successor would be quickly installed, and that I Corps could be insulated effectively enough "so that the removal of General Thi would not result in a chain reaction in which the other Corps Commanders and all the members of the Directorate might find their tenure shaken."

Lodge commented that he hoped Ky's "search for proof (against Thi) will cool him off and persuade him to back away from the confrontation tomorrow," even though it was clear that a decision had been made to try to do something. Lodge continued: "One must sympathize with his view that he cannot accept responsibility without being able to give orders

that are carried out in all different Corps. As the Department knows, I have long disapproved of the corps system, although recognizing it as one of the facts of life... Subordination of Corps Commanders to central authority may be part of Viet-Nam's march toward nationhood." Lodge then noted that Ky said that he had Thieu's support, an assertion which "might mean much since no one is more expert (than Thieu) at elimination of troublesome persons." ^{79/}

Lodge again called on Ky at 4:30 p.m., March 9. He asked Ky whether he "had the votes" necessary to remove Thi. Ky assured Lodge that he did. Lodge went on to warn that a change of Prime Ministers "would be disastrous" in the post-Honolulu context. Viet-Nam was making progress on every front, and "in addition, President Johnson was making great progress...his critics were looking more and more picayune and preposterous." A change of Prime Ministers therefore "could not be understood, and it would appear as a catastrophe." If, therefore, Ky had the slightest doubt of his

^{79/} From Saigon, Telegram 3260, March 9, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

ability to bring off the removal of Thi he should avoid such a confrontation. Ky replied that there was no question but that the Directorate would get rid of General Thi on March 10. Lodge then called on Chief of State Thieu, who in reply to a specific question assured Lodge that "we can easily relieve him (Thi)" and "there will be no reaction." 80/

Lodge also reported to the Department that General Westmoreland had been informed of the impending confrontation and had instructed US military advisors "to be on alert for any movement of ARVN elements that could possibly get involved."

Thi was removed on March 10 and General Nguyen Van Chuan, Commander of the ARVN 1st Division, was named to replace him. In a meeting with Lodge on March 11, Ky suggested that in order to save Thi's face it would be very desirable if he could be invited to come to the United States for medical examination and treatment. (The public explanation for Thi's removal was that he had asked for and been granted "sick

80/ From Saigon, Telegram 3265, March 9, 1966

~~(SECRET)~~

leave.") Lodge agreed to this and the necessary arrangements were immediately begun. As further inducement to Thi to accept his fate gracefully, the Embassy offered to assist in placing Thi's two younger children in a private school in Virginia (his two older children were already there).

b. The Buddhist Response

In a message to the Department on March 11, the Embassy assessed possible reaction to Thi's removal.^{81/} It first noted that despite public reference to "sick leave," the removal of Thi would be clearly recognized as evidence of "determination of the Directorate to establish a true national government."

The Embassy speculated that the most important reaction would probably come in I Corps, where several officials owed their appointments to Thi. It added, however, that in the judgment of the Hue Consulate, "student-Buddhist dissidents" in Hue were not strong supporters of Thi.

^{81/} From Saigon, Telegram 3305, March 11, 1966
~~(CONFIDENTIAL)~~.

The Embassy agreed with Hue that "relations between Thi and the Hue troublemakers have cooled noticeably during last several months...if Tri Quang may once have entertained idea of using Thi for political purposes, he had discarded it possibly because he found Thi unresponsive to his influence."

The Embassy warned, however, that this did not necessarily mean that Thi's departure would be greeted "apathetically." "They (militant Buddhists) are quite capable of trying to use it as an 'issue' in the hope thereby of mounting a campaign against the government. Viet Cong agents will also be working hard to stir up trouble. Such a campaign would probably use theme that hero of abortive November 11, 1960, coup was being cast aside by 'Can Lao revanchists.' Extent this I Corps reaction will depend to great extent on how well Ky prepared ground...and how smoothly General Chuan assumes his new command." The Embassy also noted that "in attempting to assess Buddhist reaction to his passing, one should not lose sight of the apparent Tri Quang - Tam Chau split in UBA ranks. There is strong possibility that if one wing rises

to Thi's defense, the other wing will either abstain or quietly side with GVN."

The first signs of reaction to Thi's removal came on March 11 in Danang. Approximately 1500 people gathered for a protest meeting in downtown Danang to hear speakers charge that Thi was arrested by "corrupt people connected with the Can Lao" while "struggling for rights of people." They demanded that he be returned immediately to I Corps. By March 12, pro-Thi demonstrations had been organized in Hue and Hoi An, capital of Quang Nam Province.

On the afternoon of March 12, Thich Tam Chau, Chairman of the Buddhist Institute (Vien Hoa Dao), called a press conference at which he set forth the position of the militant Buddhists. In a communique signed by Chau in his official capacity, the Buddhists presented four points:

"(1) The generals and officers who contributed to the revolution (against Diem) should be restored to their positions...(2) To avoid political frictions...the generals serving abroad or at home should return to their purely military duties. (3) The nation urgently needs...a National Assembly and a government of national solidarity. (4) The

government should implement without delay what it has promised...particularly the social revolution related to the life of the masses."

The Embassy viewed the document as "interesting but not necessarily incendiary." It noted that no mention was made of Thi's removal, no gauntlet was thrown and no deadlines for action set. The communique appeared to the Embassy as a "cautious testing of political wind," designed at least in part to "let government know they are still there and that due attention must be paid them." The Embassy added that Ky and Tam Chau had met at least twice in recent days and "Ky has indicated his confidence that organized Buddhists are not supporting Thi." 82/

c. The Struggle

Nonetheless, with this communique the lines were drawn for what was to become a very nearly fatal contest between the GVN and the "struggle movement." Ky subsequently

82/ From Saigon, Telegram to the Department
(number missing), March 13, 1966 (~~CONFIDENTIAL~~)

met with Tam Chau, and on March 14 told Lodge that Chau had appeared to find Ky's position in response to the four Buddhist demands acceptable. With regard to the Buddhist call for an elected government, Chau was said to have wanted the Advisory Council to include mostly provincial council representatives. Ky told Chau that he intended to name some provincial councillors, and felt that Chau was satisfied with this response. Ky also told Lodge that it had definitely been decided that Thi would have to leave the country. He proposed that Colonel Sam Wilson, a friend of Thi's then serving as Mission Coordinator, talk to Thi and convince him to leave peaceably. Lodge agreed to this.^{83/}

A mass meeting was held in Hue on March 14 in support of the Buddhist Institute communique, and there were work stoppages in Danang. On March 15, Ky told Lodge that it was now clear that "bad people" and Buddhists were trying to take

^{83/} From Saigon, Telegram 3333, March 14, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

advantage of the situation. He therefore concluded that the time had come to abandon his "gentle" approach, but did not elaborate on precisely what he meant by this. Lodge commented that "Problem is no longer simply question of Thi but it has developed into a broader confrontation between Buddhists and government, with anti-government elements getting into the act." 84/

Later the same day Lodge reported that "Problem at present is not Buddhist frustrations but Buddhist power play. Buddhists have nothing to be frustrated about at this juncture. On the contrary, they are reacting to Ky's forthcoming gesture by raising the ante to include concessions which Ky cannot possibly make: e.g., call for removal of Thieu and Co (General Nguyen Huu Co, Deputy Prime Minister) and for end of military government." Lodge added that he planned to meet militant Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang on March 17. 85/

84/ From Saigon, Telegram 3343, March 15, 1966 (~~SECRET~~).

85/ From Saigon, Telegram 3359, March 16, 1966 (~~SECRET~~).

In a third conversation with Lodge on March 16, Ky noted that the Buddhists had now enlarged the third of their original four points to demand an end to the military government and popular elections for a civilian government. Lodge reported that "Ky thinks -- and I agree -- this is a reckless step to take. The Ky Government is moving toward constitutional democracy just as fast as the traffic will bear. To hold elections without a constitution, without electoral laws, without the inescapable minimum amount of public information is to court a wildly irresponsible mess." ^{86/}

Lodge's meeting with Tri Quang took place as scheduled on March 17 at the Ambassador's residence. Quang first assured Lodge that the Buddhists did not want a coup or immediate change of government, but only sought to "quicken the process of democracy." Quang proposed that there be a "national convention or assembly," instead of the Advisory Council, which would draft a constitution and choose a new

^{86/} From Saigon, Telegram 3361, March 16, 1966
(SECRET).

Chief of State and Prime Minister. He urged US support for his proposal.

Lodge, in accordance with instructions from the Department, ^{87/} replied that the GVN plan for democracy building, which was recently confirmed at Honolulu, was a good one and the most that could reasonably be expected. The GVN was on the right track, had made progress, and should be allowed to continue. He added that the US is not "desperately attached to any individual, but no government could possibly operate if it is changing all the time." Lodge also noted that the sequence outlined by Quang was wrong: drafting of the constitution should be followed by election laws, not selection of the Chief of State by the constitutional convention.

Quang then declared that President Johnson may have been misled if he believed Thieu and Ky could carry out a true social revolution. The GVN was so inept, Quang asserted, that even Catholics were opposed to it. Quang

^{87/} Department of State Telegram 2736 to Saigon.

asked to keep in touch in the future, and Lodge agreed. Lodge commented that "Quang is brilliant, dynamic, deeply interested in politics, totally ignorant of democratic methods, with a capacity for debate and demagoguery. It is hard to tell how much he believes the bunch of specious arguments cited in this telegram. I believe he will reflect on what I said, but he appears quite determined to pursue his course for the time being." 88/

While Tri Quang was meeting with Lodge, Tam Chau met with Thieu and Ky. Quang later told an Embassy officer that Thieu and Ky promised to announce the formation of a Constituent Assembly on March 18. If this promise were kept, said Quang, the situation in I Corps would return to normal. Bui Diem earlier told the Political Counselor that the GVN was in fact considering the possibility of holding elections for a Constituent Assembly. The alternative was to form an appointive Democracy-Building Council with a heavy input of provincial council members. However, on March 18, Thieu told

88/ From Saigon, Telegram 3371, March 17, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

Lodge that the Directorate intended to stand by its original plan, e.g., to appoint a consultative assembly which would not include provincial and municipal council members. Lodge agreed with Thieu's wariness of "making a deal" with the Buddhists; "to start such a procedure would certainly put one on a very slippery slope." ^{89/}

In a March 19 message to the Department, the Embassy assessed the situation in the following terms:

"... What has happened so far is that Buddhist Institute has...amplified its demands by asking for some form of so-called Constituent Assembly. In effect, they are asking the government to give up power...

"... If the Buddhists' aim is to bring down government, then no type of compromise solution...will satisfy them. However, if they are dealing in good faith and there is 'give' in their position, it is probably just as well that GVN announced yesterday its intention to stick to original blueprint (as outlined by Ky on January 15). Both positions

^{89/} From Saigon, Telegram 3393, March 18, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~

are now on record and a dialogue which hopefully will reveal extent of Institute's strength and resolve, and will at same time permit the airing of views held by other elements within the populace, can begin."

The Embassy assured Washington that "we are in meantime keeping our lines open to all the principals, using whatever thoughts seem most persuasive to promote stability, and stressing the unfortunate consequences of any political upheaval on the prosecution of war, on United States and world public opinion, etc." 90/

The situation continued relatively unchanged for the next several days. Speaking to a National Administrative Conference on March 25, Ky averred that he agreed with those who wanted an elected National Assembly and a civilian government. He stated that the GVN was working toward that goal, but made no mention of how or when it would be achieved. The Directorate during this period was also apparently considering

90/ From Saigon, Telegram 3417, March 19, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

the possibility of bringing back several of the exiled generals, another of the Buddhists' demands. However, on March 29, Ky told Lodge that the generals had not changed their minds regarding the election of a Constituent Assembly, an attitude which Lodge shared: "...if such were held it would gravely alarm every one of the many (non-Buddhist) minorities in this country." 91/

The Buddhists meanwhile had in no way moderated their position. Public demonstrations against the "Thieu-Ky clique" continued to take place in I Corps, and much of the ARVN 1st Division (stationed in Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces) began to clearly side with the "strugglers." In addition to its raucous anti-GVN pitch, the struggle took on increasingly anti-American overtones, with the US Government pictured as the protectors of the reactionary ruling clique.

On March 30, the Department expressed its concern at the

91/ From Saigon, Telegram 3577, March 29, 1966
(~~SECRET~~).

continued political agitation in South Viet-Nam and the seeming inability of the GVN to deal effectively with it. It lamented the tendency of the GVN to use force to quell "strugglers" in Saigon while allowing the I Corps dissidents to continue their activities unimpeded. "In short, situation seems to be going from bad to worse without any indication that GVN has any clear idea of how to deal with it." The Department recommended that the Embassy urge the GVN to identify and isolate any Communist agitators in Hue and Danang and arrest those with solid VC connections, and to mete out military discipline to military officers participating in the struggle. The Department also suggested that the GVN combine the carrot with the stick:

"If GVN unable obtain consensus for democracy-building plan, could it as alternative call conference of key figures in drama to hammer out solution in one room followed immediately by joint announcement...? Recognize this is major concession in appearance, but Directorate's refusal to make concessions or to act has not been markedly successful to date." Finally, the Department raised the possibility of an

official US Mission statement regretting the political disorder and its implications for the US-GVN effort in South Viet-Nam. ^{92/}

The Embassy explained GVN reluctance to act against Hue and Danang as a caution growing out of a fear of "backlash in circumstances they could not handle." More forceful action against Saigon demonstrators, on the other hand, stemmed from GVN realization that "Saigon is not a city in which mass demonstrations can be allowed without most dire consequences." Lodge believed that Ky's unwillingness to make a firm announcement of political plans (e.g. formation of the Consultative Assembly) was designed to gain time to gather wider support and to encourage a split within Buddhist ranks. "He and his associates apparently estimate that they can temporize longer than we think safe or desirable." Lodge reported that the GVN did in fact have definite plans in the works to clamp down on the I Corps "strugglers," similar to those measures suggested by the Department. He recommended against any US Mission

^{92/} Department of State Telegram 2893, March 30, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~

statement at this point, expressing the view that attention was already focused too heavily on the US, and that in any case, the disorders in I Corps "are a result of deliberate desire Buddhist extremists and student trouble-makers to put pressure on US and on GVN, and we believe they are also a result of VC influence at work." 93/

On April 1, the Department stated that "We sense Directorate may be hamstrung by unwillingness make greater explicit political concessions, but our feeling tends more and more to view that this is most hopeful horn of dilemma." It inquired whether there would be any advantage in expressing this view to the GVN by means of a Presidential message. 94/
Lodge replied that he generally agreed with this analysis, but doubted that a Presidential message would be desirable. 95/

93/ From Saigon, Telegram 3605, March 31, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~

94/ Department of State Telegram 2939, April 1, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~

95/ From Saigon, Telegram 3671, April 2, 1966
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In reviewing the situation on April 2, the Embassy stated that the time had come "when firm decisions and actions can no longer wait." The Embassy's objective had been "to preserve the government,...to allow whatever political evolution could develop... with continuity of government and maintenance of security in the country." These objectives were all in some degree of jeopardy. If the confrontation between the GVN and Buddhists were not resolved peaceably, "we face two fundamental choices: (a) We can urge further compromise to meet practically all Buddhist demands; (b) We can back Ky and his colleagues in whatever they do to restore order and retain authority." The Embassy favored the second course, which would require "immediate decision and announcement of government's final program for political evolution, including timing, without further compromise or discussion with opposition elements," while "simultaneously government would move troops to I Corps to restore order." The report added that there were indications that the GVN was already drawing up plans for troop movements of this sort.^{96/}

^{96/} From Saigon, Telegram 3672, April 2, 1966 ~~(SECRET)~~.

Ky informed Lodge on April 4 that the Directorate had met and voted (1) to hold a political convention, and (2) to take "strong measures." He asked Lodge to provide airlift for three battalions of troops to be moved from Saigon to Danang to reassert GVN authority there, to which Lodge agreed. The troops were moved north the same day.

Immediately following the troop movement, the Secretary, in a message to Lodge, expressed the view that "in general, we believe present circumstances call for USG taking more active role in political discussions in every way possible... crisis has clearly come to a head and some political answer must be found as quickly and peacefully as possible." To this end he urged "substantially more contact with GVN and other political elements than has hitherto seemed wise either to you or to us... We believe time has come for maximum use of your own great personal prestige both with GVN and with other key leaders." 97/

97/ Department of State Telegram 2964, April 4, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

On April 5, the GVN announced that a "National Political Congress" would be convened within ten days. In a conversation that day, Thieu asked Lodge to use whatever influence could be brought to bear to convince all political groups in Viet-Nam to go along with a newly-revised GVN plan for political evolution, working toward the election of a constitutional convention. Lodge readily agreed. Referring to the Secretary's message, Lodge emphasized that he had offered advice at every phase of the crisis, and assured the Secretary that "I share your desire for a political solution." Lodge doubted, however, that he personally should try to see the leaders of the opposition.^{98/}

Ky told Lodge on the morning of April 6 that he had decided to "reoccupy" Danang by military means. However, Bui Diem called on Lodge that afternoon to say that, after Lodge had left, Ky and the other generals had agreed that there should be an "overall political solution before attempting a local military solution in Danang." Accordingly, Ky had sent

^{98/} From Saigon, Telegram 3746, April 5, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

a letter to Tam Chau agreeing to hold a constitutional convention within six months, in return for which Chau would call off anti-GVN activities in I Corps. Lodge found Bui Diem's remarks "deplorable and astounding." Lodge preferred the decision outlined to him by Ky in the morning. He concluded that "one thing seems clear tonight: GVN has a big case of cold feet." 99/

The Department, however, was of the opinion that the GVN decision to seek an "over-all political solution" was the proper one. "... We believe you should not repeat not urge immediate Danang operation at present, but rather that entire focus of your efforts at all levels should be to get political process started." 100/

In succeeding days and weeks the GVN attempted without much success to reach the desired "overall political solution." Countering Ky's offer for a constitutional convention within six months, Tam Chau on April 7 demanded that it be

99/ From Saigon, Telegram 3761, April 6, 1966 (~~SECRET~~).

100/ Department of State Telegram 3001, April 6, 1966 (~~SECRET~~).

convened "within the next two or three days." The GVN found this a bit extreme, and the crisis continued on dead center. Nonetheless, a National Political Congress was held as had been planned, followed by the formation of an Electoral Law Drafting Commission to write laws for the election of the Constituent Assembly. Meanwhile, military operations to "reoccupy" Danang were held in abeyance and Danang continued under de facto control of the struggle movement. The GVN did, however, make another shift in I Corps commanders, replacing General Chuan, who had proven vacillating and ineffective, with General Ton That Dinh, who was to prove equally so.

On May 13, the Embassy once again outlined US objectives and possible courses of action. It assumed first that the United States sought: (a) democratic elections in which voters were "free from intimidation by VC, the Vien Hoa Dao Buddhists or anyone else;" (b) orderly transition to a civilian government committed to vigorous prosecution of the war and susceptible to US advice; and (c) continued unity among non-communist elements in the fight against the VC. Since the achievement of these objectives was of crucial importance, it

was clear that US influence should be exerted to bring them about. These would require in the first instance reassertion of GVN authority in I Corps. "... This is not to recommend a violent attempt to 'reoccupy' Danang and Hue, but rather a firm, persistent and quiet effort... to whittle away at the Buddhist machine in I Corps." 101/

The GVN was apparently reaching a similar conclusion with respect to the necessity to reassert its authority in I Corps. It, however, chose a more direct means than the whittling process recommended by the Embassy. On May 14, without the knowledge of the US Mission, the GVN dispatched additional troops to Danang and began military action to retake the city from the struggle movement and military elements cooperating with it. (In a meeting with Ky that evening, Deputy Ambassador Porter expressed US displeasure at being kept in the dark on a development of such importance.) In the days following, as the reoccupation of Danang proceeded,

101/ From Saigon, Telegram 4554, May 13, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

the Embassy sought to assure that it was done as relatively non-violently as possible, specifically urging the GVN to avoid attacks on pagodas, where many of the hard-core strugglers had sought refuge.

d. Conclusion of the Struggle

The gulf between the GVN and the militant Buddhists widened markedly in the aftermath of the Danang operation. Buddhist invective and demands, emanating now from Hue (where Tri Quang was located), became more extreme and were leveled against the US as well as the GVN. The Embassy reported on May 30: "... as Ky is able to consolidate past gains and find new opportunities the struggle force will become more fanatic and desperate in its actions. The immediate outlook is for more bitter clashes between extremists and the government. It also is likely to see even more attacks on the United States and US policy by the struggle forces." ^{102/} The increasingly anti-US posture of the

^{102/} From Saigon, Telegram 5124, May 30, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

struggle culminated in the burning of the USIS Library and American Consulate in Hue.

In an attempt to break the political impasse, the Embassy, with Departmental concurrence, sought to arrange a private meeting between Ky and Thi. (Thi had been allowed to return to I Corps in mid-March, in the futile hope that this would help to quiet the situation.) The meeting took place at Chu Lai and was reportedly cordial. It had little apparent effect, however, in bringing the GVN and the militant Buddhists closer together.

However, there were signs of progress on the political front. The Electoral Law Drafting Commission (ELDC) completed its work in early June as scheduled, its appointed members having drafted a law providing for the election of a Constituent Assembly in September. The GVN, in line with other ELDC proposals, also decided to form an interim "Peoples-Army Council," an appointive body to advise the Directorate, and to enlarge the Directorate itself by the inclusion of ten civilian members. Both of these steps, supported by the Embassy, were designed as interim

civilianization measures pending completion of the constitutional framework. The enlarged Directorate was formed on June 6 and the PAC was formally presented in late June, shortly after the first anniversary of the Provisional Charter of 1965.

As of late May and early June, the GVN had continued to maintain contact with militant Buddhist leaders (with the exception of Tri Quang, who by this time had gone on record as rejecting any plan for phased democratization as long as Thieu and Ky remained in power). On May 31, Ky met with Tam Chau and other militant leaders, and reached what he later described as a "verbal entente." The "entente" apparently involved GVN agreement to enlarge the Directorate and create the PAC. However, the GVN also felt the time had come to move against Hue. The Department expressed concern, which Lodge transmitted to Ky, that military action against Hue could seriously undermine or undo the latest understanding reached between the GVN and the Buddhists. The GVN went ahead nonetheless, using combat police from outside the Hue area to stiffen the resolve of loyal government units in

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Hue. The restoration of GVN authority in Hue was accomplished quickly and relatively peacefully. The "struggle movement" of 1966 was in large measure ended.

Tri Quang continued in defiant but increasingly impotent opposition to the GVN in succeeding months. He continued to call for Thieu and Ky to step down, and instructed his followers to boycott the September Constituent Assembly elections. (Quang bolstered his moral position by means of a 100-day "hunger strike.")

Tam Chau was to take a somewhat different position, however. Immediately following the Hue operation, Chau called on Lodge to complain that he had been put in a difficult position and was being criticized for his "moderate" views. He expressed the hope that Lodge would "encourage" Thieu and Ky to step down. Lodge replied that it was not for the United States to tell the Vietnamese people who their leaders should or should not be. He stressed, however, that he would encourage the GVN to carry out fair elections in September, and urged the Buddhists to participate in them and to

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remain in consultation with the GVN. 103/ Chau may have been disappointed at this line at the time, but he eventually drifted into a position of passive support for the GVN and into an open break with Tri Quang. The schism between the Tam Chau "moderates" and Tri Quang "militants," a direct outgrowth of an essentially unsuccessful "struggle," was to prove quite lasting, and seriously weakened Buddhism as a political force in Viet-Nam.

103/ From Saigon, Telegram 5412, June 9, 1966
~~(CONFIDENTIAL)~~.

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SERVICE SET

11. Moving Toward Constitutional Government (1966-67)

a. Election of the Constituent Assembly

The struggle movement, as noted above, accelerated the process of transition to constitutional government begun by Prime Minister Ky in his speech of January 15. The National Political Congress was convened on April 12 and met for three days. It endorsed the Buddhist demand for an elected, rather than appointed, constitutional convention. Prime Minister Ky accepted that proposal and on May 5 convened an Election Law Drafting Committee. The ELDC completed its draft and submitted it to the newly-enlarged Directorate on June 7. The Directorate modified it somewhat. In its final form the draft provided for the election of a 117-member Assembly, with one representative allotted to each 50,000 voters in the May 1965 provincial council elections. The election was set for Sunday, September 11, 1966.

The Embassy actively monitored the work of the ELDC and reported its deliberations in full. There was considerable

Departmental interest in various aspects of the law, and a rather detailed interchange developed between Saigon and Washington on such esoteric matters as the merits or demerits of list voting. In general, however, the US Government was concerned with relatively few basic issues: that a broad spectrum of candidates be allowed to run, that as many people as possible be allowed to vote, and that the election be administered fairly and freely. The Department pronounced itself satisfied with the ELDC's work: " we believe these drafts...should provide solid, credible and valid basis for Constituent Assembly elections. Embassy's efforts to influence discussions in right directions have clearly been most beneficial and are warmly commended." ^{104/}

An even more fundamental US consideration in this period was merely that the process of political evolution not be interrupted. As will be seen below, this was a major objective of United States policy throughout 1966 and beyond.

Ambassador Lodge spoke to Thieu or Ky several times

^{104/} Department of State Telegram 3796, June 7, 1966 ~~(SECRET)~~

during the summer of 1966 on the importance of organizing the elections both efficiently and impartially. For example, on July 22 Lodge called on Ky to inquire about the reported disqualification on technical grounds of two prominent candidates, Phan Khac Suu and Dang Van Sung. Lodge expressed regret that the two had been disqualified. He then "stressed the importance of these elections in terms of US opinion, of which Ky was well aware -- also the effect on world opinion... He (Ky) said that the generals had had a meeting concerning the elections and had agreed that it had to be organized honestly..." (Both Sung and Suu were allowed to run and were elected.) 105/

Although there were other admonitions of this sort in July and August, it became clear that Ky, Thieu and the Directorate did in fact intend to proceed with both vigor and fairness in organizing the election. It became the GVN's number one priority and resources were devoted to it to the maximum extent possible. US interest was equally high, but

105/ From Saigon, Telegram 1631, July 22, 1966
~~(SECRET)~~.

the Saigon Mission scrupulously avoided becoming involved in a manner which might influence the outcome. However, US resources were devoted to supporting the efficient organization of the election. For example, JUSPAO (Joint US Public Affairs Office), whose printing facilities were superior to those of the GVN, assisted in the production of non-partisan campaign materials (urging people to vote, graphically describing voting procedures, etc.). On the days immediately prior to the election, US military units were assigned tasks normally belonging to ARVN in order to free Vietnamese troops for the protection of polling places and candidate rallies.

The Embassy and the Department were well pleased with the results of the election, in which more than 80 percent of registered voters went to the polls despite instances of VC terrorism. On the afternoon of September 11, Ambassador Lodge offered these thoughts: "For the Vietnamese to have voted in such large numbers in the face of terrorism shows their willingness to defy the Viet Cong in order to take a step which they believe is a step forward for their country; [the election is]...a development which they believe will protect them from despotism, instability and corruption in

government." 106/ In a message to Embassies in troop-contributing countries and NATO capitals, the Department noted that the large voter turnout "...constitutes important step in return to constitutional, representative and more broadly-based government in South Viet-Nam; and...is dramatic demonstration of Viet Cong's inability both to exercise dominant influence over South Viet-Nam population and to hamper GVN's ability to carry out important internal programs... While massive turnout cannot be interpreted specifically as positive vote of confidence in GVN or Prime Minister Ky, it represents as minimum willingness participate in GVN-sponsored program of political development." 107/

b. Drafting of the Constitution

The Embassy's thinking on the process of constitution drafting was outlined in a message to the Department on September 4: "We do not propose that we seek to influence every detail going into the formation of the Vietnamese

106/ From Saigon, Telegram 5731, September 11, 1966 (LIMITED OFFICIAL USE).

107/ Department of State Telegram 46358, Circular, September 13, 1966 (~~SECRET~~)

constitution. We should, rather, concentrate on those features which we consider absolutely necessary to the achievement of our objectives in Viet-Nam. To the greatest extent possible, we should not try to prevent the Vietnamese from drawing up a Vietnamese document -- which they will assuredly do anyway..." The Embassy outlined the following items as "essential to our interests:" (a) a strong, stable executive; e.g., a presidential system (the Embassy noted that this system, or a variation of it with a Prime Minister as well as a President, appeared to be favored by many Assembly candidates); (b) executive control of the military; (c) emergency powers for the executive; (d) a bill of rights, and declaration of the democratic nature of the government; and (e) minority representation in the legislative. The Embassy then listed a number of items considered desirable but not absolutely essential, including a provision allowing relatively easy amendment of the constitution, and expansion of local government powers. 108/

108/ From Saigon, Telegram 5228, September 4, 1966
~~(CONFIDENTIAL)~~

In general these points were adopted and followed as guidelines in the Embassy's contact with the Assembly and the Directorate. There proved to be a rather broad consensus within the Assembly as to the basic elements of the constitution, and those elements were in large part similar to the ideas set forth by the Embassy on September 4. Nonetheless, specific issues did arise in which the US Government took an active interest and sought to exert its influence. In these instances US views were made known both to the Directorate, which was able to wield reasonably firm control over a significant minority of the Assembly, and to Assembly members themselves.

One of these issues was Assembly consideration of Article 4 of the constitution, outlawing "Communism in all its forms." The Department stated that "it of utmost importance that constitution create no institutional obstacles to 'national reconciliation' program and that it represent a clear democratic alternative to Communism." It added that to give the concept of national reconciliation "maximum credibility...constitution should avoid any explicit condemnation

of political ideologies." The Department urged the Embassy to "persist in your efforts to persuade key CA members... to find some alternative language which will give adequate protection against subversion." 109/

Saigon replied that it was very much aware of the Department's views on this subject, and that it was taking every opportunity in contacts with both the Directorate and CA members to press for alternate wording. 110/ However, despite the Embassy's best efforts, the uncompromising language originally proposed in the CA stood, an experience which was far from atypical.

While the wording of constitutional provisions was considered of fundamental importance, issues of more immediate concern were those provoking clashes between the Assembly and the Directorate and which thereby raised a threat to the continued existence of the CA and to the process of transition toward constitutional government. These crises most often

109/ Department of State Telegram 83552, November 11, 1966 (~~CONFIDENTIAL~~).

110/ From Saigon, Telegram 10850, November 14, 1966 (~~CONFIDENTIAL~~).

arose out of differences of opinion over constitutional provisions, although some were unrelated to the constitution itself. For example, the Assembly tended to favor immediate election of province chiefs, while the Directorate was adamantly opposed to the idea. The Embassy favored it in principle, but felt that under existing wartime conditions it should be implemented only gradually, and this was the view it conveyed to members of the Directorate and CA. Ultimately, that view prevailed -- not necessarily because it was favored by the United States but because it was a middle position between the two extremes. In this and other issues on which the Directorate and the Assembly differed, the Embassy did not as a matter of course seek to present specific compromise solutions or to convince one side of the merits of the opposite view, although this was occasionally attempted. However, it did constantly remind both the GVN and the Assembly of the importance of the process of constitution drafting and the necessity, therefore, to reach some form of compromise, an effort which may have helped to moderate several potentially

serious disagreements between the two sides.

The Assembly completed the constitution within the time limit allotted by its law of organization (six months). The constitution was submitted to the Directorate in mid-March, and was approved by the Directorate and Armed Forces Council without change (although the Assembly had previously accepted several Directorate-sponsored amendments). It was promulgated by Chief of State Thieu on April 1, 1967.

c. Guam Conference, 1967

President Johnson, Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara and other senior officials met with Vietnamese leaders in Guam on March 20 and 21, 1967. Like the Honolulu Conference of February 1966, this meeting was concerned as much with non-military as with military aspects of the joint effort. Prominent among the non-military items of discussion were progress in constitutional development and the upcoming presidential election.

President Johnson congratulated Thieu and Ky on completion of the constitution (approved by the Armed Forces Council just

prior to their departure from Viet-Nam). The President also praised the Vietnamese leaders for their recognition of the need for civilians and the military to work together and for broadening the popular base of the GVN. He expressed confidence that the presidential election of 1967 would be as free, fair and open as the elections of 1966.

The United States was concerned not only that the presidential election be free and open, but that it not lead to serious divisions within the military. In a message to the Department before the Guam Conference, Embassy Saigon suggested that President Johnson emphasize to Thieu and Ky "the importance we attach to the maintenance of military unity, both as the necessary base for effective military action and also as the means to political stability and progress." ^{111/} President Johnson spoke along these lines in his conversation with Thieu and Ky, in addition to stressing the necessity for free and fair elections. Both Thieu and Ky assured the President that they would do nothing to divide

^{111/} From Saigon, Telegram 20577, March 17, 1967
(~~SECRET~~).

~~SECRET~~

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the military in the months ahead. In a press conference before leaving to return to Saigon, Thieu and Ky said in effect that they would not both run for President, and that each would support the other if he ran. Both emphasized their desire to promote unity and solidarity within the armed forces and among the Vietnamese people.

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SERVICE SET

12. Implementing the Constitution (1967)a. Drafting of Election Laws

The next step in this gradual evolution was the drafting of electoral laws for the election of the President, Vice President and National Assembly. The Constituent Assembly conferred this authority on itself, sitting as a "Transitional National Assembly." Our Embassy's view with regard to these laws was essentially that they should provide for fair, credible elections, which would "satisfy two basic goals: they must tend to unite the nation -- not divide it," and they must be "...the act of a free people freely exercising their right to choose their own leaders." This meant, the Embassy continued, that there should be strong safeguards against fraud, widest possible voter participation should be permitted, and there must be equality for all candidates. In addition, the Embassy thought it advisable that the winner of the presidential election be required to receive a broad mandate, by means of a runoff if necessary. The Embassy cautioned, however, that "these laws should be a Vietnamese product. As

in the case of the Constitution, our powers of persuasion will probably be effective in some, but certainly not all, cases." 112/

The Department concurred in this analysis, and strongly endorsed the idea of a runoff election in order to insure a wide mandate for the elected President. This proved, however, to be a case in which the Embassy's powers of persuasion were not effective. The idea of a runoff election was popular neither with the Directorate nor the majority of Assembly members, and the Assembly eventually rejected it.

b. Thieu-Ky Split

An additional matter of continuing concern was the possibility that the presidential election might foment serious divisions within the military leadership. Ambassador Bunker spoke to Ky of this on April 28, noting "our interest in avoiding dissension among the military regardless of who might be the candidate." Ky expressed confidence that there would be no disunity. 113/

112/ From Saigon, Telegram 23078, April 14, 1967 ~~(SECRET)~~.

113/ From Saigon, Telegram 24286, April 28, 1967 ~~(SECRET)~~.

A split, however, did develop, growing quite acute in late May as it became apparent that both Thieu and Ky were considering running for President. On May 25, the Department urged the Embassy to continue to press hard for a Thieu-Ky agreement that only one of them would run, believing this the surest way to avoid a split in the military. The Department regarded it as unwise, however, to make a choice between Ky and Thieu, which would be sure to alienate some portion of the military leadership and "would also be taken as clear evidence of the controlling role of the United States on domestic Vietnamese matters." It concluded that our policy should be "an even-handed one between Thieu and Ky" while urging them to decide on one or the other. "Meanwhile, it is important to keep before the military two other principles which they must support, namely the proper conduct of the elections and a commitment to accept their outcome if properly held and to support the resulting government." ^{114/}

^{114/} Department of State Telegram 202559, May 25, 1967 ~~(SECRET)~~.

Bunker followed these guidelines in his conversations with Thieu and Ky, first urging that the two resolve their differences and unite behind one or the other, then, after both had announced their candidacies, urging that they work out some arrangement which would insure that the armed forces could be kept aloof from their contest and not be divided by it. In this effort, Bunker several times reminded Ky and Thieu of the assurances both had personally given to President Johnson at Guam that they would not permit disruption of the integrity and unity of the armed forces.

The Thieu-Ky dispute was eventually taken to the Armed Forces Council for resolution. Following a secret session of the Council on June 30, 1967, it was announced that Thieu and Ky had agreed to run together, with Thieu as President and Ky as Vice President. An alleged condition for Ky's accepting the subordinate role was a confidential written agreement permitting Ky to retain significant executive authority. It was far from certain that there had in fact been such an agreement, and the precise circumstances surrounding the decision of the Armed Forces Council remain

obscure. The Embassy surmised that one of the most important elements in the Thieu-Ky merger was the commitment made by both of them to President Johnson regarding the maintenance of unity within the military. Although the precise interplay of events leading to the merger was not yet clear, the Embassy noted that "...it is apparent that there was an overwhelming feeling within the military that unity had to be achieved." Ambassador Bunker added that he was "more than ever persuaded that our approach to the problem was the right one, i.e., to exert continuing but careful pressure on the principals, but to bring them in the end to work out their own solution." He recommended that this general approach be maintained in the future. 115/

c. Local Elections

At the same time that preparations for national elections were under way, the GVN moved ahead with elections at the local level. On five successive Sundays in April elections were conducted in 984 of Viet-Nam's approximately

115/ From Saigon, Telegram 29258, July 1, 1967
(~~SECRET~~).

2,500 villages, to fill almost 9,000 village council positions. During the period from May 14 to June 11, elections for hamlet chiefs and assistant hamlet chiefs were held in 4,476 hamlets (of a total of approximately 12,000 hamlets in Viet-Nam). The United States assisted in this, much as it did in the 1966 Constituent Assembly election, e.g., by printing non-partisan election materials, providing transportation for civil servants involved in organizing the elections, and coordinating security arrangements with GVN forces. Voter turnout was high despite Viet Cong harassment, averaging 77 percent of registered voters for the village elections and 78 percent for the hamlet elections. These elections continued in additional areas during the balance of 1967 as security conditions improved.

d. The Presidential Election, 1967

American policy toward the presidential and National Assembly elections and the election campaign was set forth in a Mission Council memorandum of June 5: "The policy of the United States is not to support any individual party or any specific candidate for office during the coming

elections in Viet-Nam. It is our purpose to be absolutely impartial and to do all we can to see to it that the national elections are conducted by the Government of Viet-Nam as fairly, honorably and impartially as possible. It is our policy to provide the Vietnamese with all appropriate advice and assistance to this end." 116/ As was done in the Constituent Assembly election and village/hamlet elections, the US Mission assisted the GVN in the physical arrangements required by the elections. Extreme care was taken to insure that American personnel at all levels conducted themselves impartially and that US facilities were not used for partisan purposes. Detailed guidance was distributed to American military and civilian advisers throughout the country stressing the need for such impartiality and prescribing in precise terms what official Americans could and could not do.

Ambassador Bunker regularly reminded Thieu and Ky of their responsibility to keep the campaign equitable and to insure

116/ Mission Council Memorandum, June 5, 1967;
Enclosure to Airgram A-771 from Saigon,
June 22, 1967 ~~(SECRET)~~.

that the voting was not fraudulent. For example, Bunker spoke to Thieu on August 11, following an incident in which the civilian presidential candidates had, probably inadvertently, been flown to the wrong airport during a campaign trip. He emphasized to Thieu the unfortunate effect of this incident on world opinion, and stressed that it was "extremely important both for the GVN and for us that the campaign be gotten back on the tracks... I suggested that ultimately the government (GVN) has the responsibility to see that the elections are carried out fairly and honestly." ^{117/} Bunker made the same points to Ky later in the day. On August 16 the Political Counselor met with Nguyen Van Kieu, Thieu's brother, and underlined the importance of "everything possible being done not only to assure a free election but to emphasize the appearance of equity of opportunity between the government candidates and the civilian candidates." ^{118/} Also on August 16, Bunker talked with Ky and "told him once again that our policy on the elections was clearly to support

^{117/} From Saigon, Telegram 2886, August 11, 1967 (~~SECRET~~).

^{118/} From Saigon, Telegram 3226, August 16, 1967 (~~SECRET~~).

no candidate and to oppose no candidate, and to favor free and fair elections." Bunker suggested that given the normal advantages enjoyed by incumbents, Thieu and Ky "... could afford to lean over backwards in terms of running a campaign that is satisfactory to all the candidates." 119/

The Embassy reported on September 2, the final day of the campaign, that despite some initial confusion and recriminations the presidential campaign had proceeded relatively smoothly. Major issues had been freely aired, voter interest appeared relatively high, and all candidates had had ample opportunity to present their views. The campaign for the Upper House was somewhat less satisfactory, largely because of the unwieldy number of candidates (480 for 60 seats) to be chosen by the entire electorate and inadequate means to assure all of them adequate exposure. (The Lower House was elected separately on October 22 with voting being conducted on a constituency basis.) With regard to the voting itself, the

119/ From Saigon, Telegram 3223, August 16, 1967
~~(SECRET)~~.

Embassy in its election eve assessment doubted that there would be widespread fraud. It expected, however, that there would be instances of over-zealous local officials attempting to influence the outcome on behalf of some candidate (in most, but not all cases for the benefit of the Thieu-Ky slate). 120/

The election took place on September 3, in the presence of official foreign observers invited by the GVN (including a 22-man delegation from the United States) and an augmented press corps of more than 500. The Thieu-Ky ticket won with 34 percent of the vote, approximately twice that of runner-up Truong Dinh Dzu. As expected, there were instances of election irregularity. These were not, however, widespread, and in the judgment of the Embassy could not have affected the outcome of the voting. This view was shared by most foreign observers and eventually by the Transitional National Assembly, which had the constitutional authority to invalidate the presidential election. (The Assembly validated the

120/ From Saigon, Telegram 6089, September 2, 1967 ~~(SECRET)~~

election on October 2 after several days of heated debate. The outcome of the Assembly deliberations was not a foregone conclusion, even though most deputies privately admitted that Thieu won honestly. However, perhaps in part because of personal pique -- the Assembly included three defeated presidential candidates and 51 defeated senatorial candidates -- and in part because of continued frustration among pro-Ky deputies at his not being at the head of the ticket, a substantial minority of the Assembly was inclined to invalidate the results. The Embassy urged Assembly members to consider the election on its merits.)

On September 8, President Johnson sent a personal message of congratulations to Thieu. He noted that the American observers "returned believing in the fairness of the procedures and observed the intense interest of the Vietnamese people in this major step toward creating your own popularly chosen and constitutionally-based government." Although the election was a significant milestone, much remained to be accomplished "...not the least [of which] is

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the creation of a strong, effective and broadly-based government." President Johnson stated that he looked forward to continued close cooperation with Thieu, and expressed confidence that under Thieu's leadership "a peaceful, democratic, strong and prosperous Viet-Nam will emerge." 121/

121/ Department of State Telegram 34017, September 8, 1967 (LIMITED OFFICIAL USE).

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SERVICE SET

13. Post-Election Political Developments and United States Policy

a. Developments of a GVN Program

The initial emphasis of US policy following the presidential election was to encourage Thieu to adopt a realistic, high-impact program of action, an important element of which was to be measures to broaden the political base of his government. The Department suggested to Saigon on August 31 a list of priority program objectives, based on the following criteria: "(a) US pressure and/or resources can measurably affect program implementation within a few months; (b) the program objectives have a significant domestic US and international impact; and (c) they genuinely contribute to building the Vietnamese political structure and to gaining popular confidence in the new government." The Department recommended the following as priority objectives: (a) broadening the government, to include appointment of competent defeated civilian candidates to the cabinet and development of a workable political party

law; (b) improvement of the armed forces; (c) reduction of corruption; (d) revitalization of the Chieu Hoi and "national reconciliation" programs; (e) "peace initiatives," requiring study and full consultation with the other allies; (f) land reform and economic development; (g) manpower and mobilization, including immediate regularization of draft deferments. 122/ .

Ambassador Bunker on September 5 agreed that "we should use our influence immediately...to have (GVN) seek to mobilize broad based popular support by...appointment of prominent civilians, including some leading opposition candidates or supporters in new government. Prime Minister should be a respected civilian with support of an important political element." Bunker specifically suggested that Tran Van Huong and Dr. Phan Quang Dan should be offered positions in the new government. With regard to other aspects of the proposed impact program, Bunker stressed the necessity for more

122/ Department of State Telegram 30020 to Saigon, August 31, 1967 ~~(SECRET)~~.

complete mobilization of Vietnamese resources in the war effort, including laws providing for more effective utilization of manpower.^{123/}

More detailed program recommendations from the US Mission in Saigon were set forth in the form of a "Blueprint for Viet-Nam," prepared prior to the presidential election under the direction of Deputy Ambassador Eugene Locke and approved by the Mission Council and Ambassador Bunker. The "blueprint" discussed military operations as well as pacification, economic development, the manpower situation, and "progress towards democracy."^{124/}

With regard to "progress towards democracy," the blueprint outlined US objectives as follows: "...to see that the newly-elected government is as broadly based as possible, and incorporates as many of the political factions of the country as feasible; to see that qualified civilians and military

^{123/} From Saigon, Telegram 4958, September 5, 1967
~~(SECRET)~~.

^{124/} US Embassy, Saigon, Blueprint for Viet-Nam, August 1967 ~~(TOP SECRET)~~.

leaders are represented in the new government, and that it has the support of the military; and to see that the new government is permitted to function and that coups are averted." If Thieu and Ky were elected, it continued, there would be some danger of a military-civilian split between the executive and the legislature." The blueprint cautioned that the nature of the US-GVN relationship would undergo some change in the months ahead, which would of course affect the degree and manner in which US influence could be exerted in questions of GVN policy. Going from a GVN which ruled by decree, the US was to be confronted with a GVN with constitutionally defined powers, responsible in part to an elected legislature. "This process will undoubtedly mean some delays and inefficiencies, but these must be weighed against the value of having a representative and responsible GVN to formulate and carry out its policies."

The Department and the Embassy subsequently drew up detailed programs of action, incorporating in general the ideas outlined by the Department on August 31 and by the Embassy in its "Blueprint." These ideas were presented by

Ambassador Bunker to Thieu in increments during September and October. (Bunker suggested to Thieu on September 22 that he would be happy to supply ideas for an action program. Thieu welcomed his suggestion and said he would be grateful for such assistance.) 125/

Thieu and his "brain trust" studied and reworked the papers presented by the Embassy. Although some significant changes were made, many of the major points suggested by the United States were set forth as GVN objectives in Thieu's speech before the opening session of the Upper House on October 11 or in his inaugural address of October 31.

b. Broadening the Base of the GVN

As noted above, the United States considered that an important feature of President Thieu's action program should be an attempt to broaden the political base of the GVN itself, beginning by the appointment of respected civilian politicians to important cabinet positions. Ambassador Bunker

125/ From Saigon, Telegram 6624, September 22, 1967
(SECRET).

emphasized this in conversations with Thieu and Ky in early September.

However, it soon became apparent that the appointment of a politically strong cabinet would not be an easy matter. Tran Van Huong and other leading civilian politicians declined invitations to serve in the cabinet, preferring to stand aloof from the GVN at this stage. (Thieu offered Huong the Prime Minister-ship, which he turned down.) A more important limiting factor, as Bunker later commented, was the "requirement for qualified people with whom (both) Thieu and Ky can work." 126/ In a conversation on September 26, Thieu described to Bunker the nature of this limitation. He said that he had several names under consideration for Prime Minister. However, Ky had indicated to Thieu that as a matter of personal pride and prestige he would very much like to have his own man, Nguyen Van Loc, appointed as Prime Minister. (Loc was originally to have been Ky's vice presidential running-mate). Thieu said that the other generals felt Ky's wish in

126/ From Saigon, Telegram 9096, October 20, 1967
(~~SECRET~~).

this regard should be honored, and Thieu himself felt that giving in to Ky on this question would be beneficial in cementing good relations with Ky, which Thieu regarded as essential. Bunker emphasized that he completely agreed with Thieu on the necessity for a good working relationship with Ky; "...I said that I thought this more important even than the question of who was Prime Minister...and if he felt that the Loc appointment was necessary in order for him to achieve this relationship, then we would be sympathetic to his problem." 127/

Thieu's first cabinet was, therefore, undistinguished in terms of broadening the GVN's political base, although reasonably competent from a technical point of view. It was not until after the communist Tet offensive, and after Thieu had become more confident of his own position, that he was able to name a new cabinet headed by Tran Van Huong. In May 1968, shortly after the opening of the Paris talks, Thieu was ready

127/ From Saigon, Telegram 6934, September 26, 1967
~~(SECRET)~~.

to proceed with the reorganization of his government. The Department noted signs of dissatisfaction among Ky and several of the senior generals at the prospects of a change in the cabinet, and expressed concern that "he (Thieu) is...moving perhaps too quickly without having adequately prepared the terrain." While sharing the Embassy's view that a broadening of the GVN's political base by the inclusion of Tran Van Huong and others would be useful, the Department was "strongly of the opinion...that Thieu should have a full airing of his intentions with Ky and the other influential generals before he makes his actual move..." It added that, if Thieu's intentions were to combine changes in the cabinet with a reshuffle of key military positions, he would be well advised to "do them in two slices rather than a single one." ^{128/} Ambassador Bunker replied that Thieu told him he had talked with Ky and Ky was now ready to accept Huong as Prime Minister. Thieu had also said there would be no changes in the military leadership. ^{129/} President Thieu announced the appointment

^{128/} Department of State Telegram 163374, May 14, 1968 ~~(SECRET)~~.

^{129/} From Saigon, Telegram 27237, May 15, 1968 ~~(SECRET)~~

of Huong on May 18.

In Ambassador Bunker's view, the appointment of Huong was an important milestone in the development of full constitutional government in South Viet-Nam. Huong was considered assertive and independent, had a significant political following of his own, and was in no way beholden to Vice President Ky or any element of the military. Huong's appointment signified Thieu's own intention to rely less completely on the military and to develop a civilian power base.

Ambassador Bunker also felt that the Tet offensive was a major factor in this civilianization process. As he later reported: "Political developments (during the first half of 1968) were in every case conditioned and in many instances determined by the Tet attacks and the opening of the Paris talks. It was these two events more than anything else which made the formation of the Huong Government both necessary and possible. The Tet attacks caused a growing lack of confidence in the Loc Government, to the point where both the Assembly and the military in effect had begun to demand a change; the opening of the Paris talks convinced most if not

all political leaders that a government with a broader popular base was essential in order to give the GVN a strong negotiating position. And it was these two events also which persuaded Tran Van Huong that the national situation demanded he abandon his retirement..." Tet and the Paris talks also ruled out any power plays by the generals; the need for unity and strength "was compelling even from the point of view of dissatisfied military elements." This in turn "made it possible for Thieu to assume more fully the constitutional role of president rather than representative of a ruling military clique." 130/

c. Building of Constitutional Institutions

Following elections and the installation of the new government, it remained to the Vietnamese to establish the various organs and institutions called for in the new

130/ From Saigon, Telegram 32385, July 1968
(Ambassador Bunker's mid-year assessment to
the President) ~~(SECRET - NODIS)~~

constitution. This effort proceeded smoothly in the main, and the United States played no direct or major role in it.

The Upper House of the National Assembly was formally inaugurated October 11, 1967 and the Lower House 3 weeks later on October 31. The Supreme Court, required by the constitution to be established within a year from the date of President Thieu's inauguration, was sworn in on October 22, 1968, after enabling legislation passed the Assembly and was promulgated by the President. The independent anti-corruption agency, the Inspectorate, also required to be established within a year, was sworn in on October 30, 1968.

Thus five years -- almost to the day -- after South Viet-Nam's first constitution was abolished, the major institutions of a new constitutional regime were fully in place and functioning.