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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Intelligence Information Special Report

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Mandatory Review

Case # NLJ 96-261

Document # 10a

COUNTRY South Vietnam

DATE OF INFO. [REDACTED]

DATE 6 March 1968

SUBJECT

VICE PRESIDENT KY'S BELIEF THAT MILITARY DISSATISFACTION WITH PRESIDENT THIEU'S INDECISIVENESS MAY LEAD TO THIEU'S OUSTER AND REPLACEMENT BY KY

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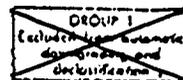
Summary

Although he knows of no concrete plans to unseat President Thieu, Vice President Ky believes that the dissatisfaction of Vietnamese military leaders with Thieu's failure to provide decisive leadership in the present emergency may lead to Thieu's ouster. Ky is no longer certain he would oppose such a move, since he believes that the survival of his country may depend on decisions taken in the next few months. He doubts that Thieu can provide the forceful and aggressive leadership and direction the times demand and believes that only he himself is capable of making the government meet the people's needs as President.

End Summary

1. Speaking in a matter-of-fact and almost detached manner, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky observed that the dissatisfaction of Vietnamese military leaders with President Nguyen Van Thieu's failure to provide decisive leadership in meeting Vietnam's pressing problems may eventually lead to moves to oust Thieu from power. Military discontent has not yet crystalized into concrete planning to unseat Thieu, but Ky is uncertain of his ability

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to dissuade military malcontents from such planning, since many of the military young turks now regard Ky himself as conservative and a member of the establishment. Beyond this, Ky is not certain that he would want to dissuade them from such action, even if he could, since what is involved now is not just his loyalty to President Thieu, but the survival of his country. Ky realizes that American government reaction to any coup d'etat in Vietnam would be "very bad".

2. Ky believes that the government cannot afford the luxuries of debate and research on urgent problems while the Viet Cong are camped on the capital's outskirts. It cannot debate priorities between refugee care in the cities and pacification in the countryside. It simply must undertake both tasks at once if the Viet Cong are not to exploit through renewed attacks weakness in the countryside or the dissatisfactions of refugee masses in the cities. By and large, the Vietnamese government needs little added support from the United States; Vietnam needs American financial help in dealing with the refugee problem and clear and repeated expressions of American determination to see the war through, but its primary need is for bold, imaginative, and aggressive presidential leadership.

3. Although Ky had previously called coups outmoded and obsolete in the post-election context, the Viet Cong Tet offensive and its resulting grave problems have greatly changed the situation and could justify a change in leadership. South Vietnam's present form of government may prove inadequate to deal with the present emergency; for example, despite the lower house's turndown of Thieu's request for special emergency financial and economic powers, the government cannot afford to waste precious time in the present crisis in seeking legislative approval for funds and measures needed to meet the emergency.

4. Ky called the next three or four months critical for Vietnam's future. Actions taken during these months will determine whether the turning point eight or ten months hence will see victory or defeat for South Vietnam. The leadership exerted by the President is vital to the effective prosecution of all civil and military operations. Without forceful direction from the top, lower government echelons will be unable to cope with the Viet Cong threat; similarly, dissatisfaction of senior Vietnamese military officers with the quality of presidential leadership will affect the morale and effectiveness of Vietnamese military forces all down the line.

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5. Ky said that President Thieu to date has not provided the leadership required by the situation and that there seems very little hope that he will change in the future. Thieu is basically a loner, unable to seek or encourage the help offered by subordinates. Even his brother Nguyen Van Kieu admits that the President is too isolated to have effective working relationships with his ministers. Thieu reacts to pressures of the moment, especially American pressures, but makes no major moves until events absolutely require action.

6. It is wrong to credit Thieu with new-found decisiveness for his recent removal of the II and IV Corps Commanders and for instituting a training course for new province chiefs; these steps should have been taken months ago, Ky said. Although the plan for reorganization of the armed forces was fully staffed out and approved by General Cao Van Vien and was presented to Thieu in December, it still reposes in the President's office. Minister of Interior Linh Quang Vien and Revolutionary Development Minister Nguyen Bao Tri have repeatedly complained to Ky in recent weeks of Thieu's indecisiveness and of the sluggishness of government actions.

7. Ky sought an audience with Thieu on 1 March and in the company of Ministers Vien and Tri voiced his concern over government inactivity on pressing issues. At this meeting Ky urged the immediate mobilization of 120,000 additional men for the armed forces and suggested that he be given the role, which Thieu then assigned him, of supervising the pacification effort. Thieu voiced his concern over the adequacy of training facilities for 120,000 new soldiers and over American willingness to arm and equip them. Ky urged streamlined training of the new conscripts at existing facilities, followed by in-unit and combat training as the men are assigned as fillers in existing units. To settle for the delays of orthodox training and assignment procedures, Ky argued, would be to risk defeat by the Viet Cong with too little and too late. American willingness to arm the new troops could be relied on since the United States would welcome this initiative and use it to answer its domestic critics of the Vietnamese failure to mobilize fully. Typically, Ky said, Thieu finally agreed to the additional mobilization but three days later had failed to act to implement it.

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8. Ky remarked that several months ago Thieu had told General Nguyen Duc Thang that there would be no need for any coup to oust him; if the military leadership became dissatisfied with his performance, they had only to inform him and he would bow out and turn over authority to someone else. Ky professed to be puzzled by Thieu's apparent continuing apprehension that Ky is seeking to undermine him; he finds this concern the more baffling after his own actions in abandoning his presidential aspirations and in giving up his recent post of Chairman of the Committee for People's Relief (CPR) to avoid speculation about his ambitions. He noted that he would have been willing to stay on as CPR Chairman had Thieu asked him to, and referred to radio Hanoi's quickness in exploiting this situation as an example of disunity within the government.

9. Ky was asked specifically whether there was any other individual besides himself who could replace President Thieu if Thieu were to be removed from office. After several moments reflection Ky replied with a flat "no". In answer to a second question relating to his previous tenure as Prime Minister and referring to some of the criticisms levied against his performance then, Ky replied that his previous performance in that role should not be used to measure his abilities since it should be remembered that Thieu held the position of Chief of State and could and did occasionally frustrate Ky's proposals by simply failing to sign the decrees Ky submitted to the office of Chief of State. Ky indicated that as President he would not operate under such a handicap. In answer to another question whether he would be able to gain popular support and the trust of the people as President, Ky replied it would not be of much importance whether the people liked or trusted him initially, particularly in this crisis atmosphere, and that he would instead gradually gain popular acceptance by demonstrating his ability to make the government function to meet the needs of the people.

10. FIELD DISSEM: STATE (Ambassador Bunker, Political Counselor) USMACV (General Westmoreland, Ambassador Komer) CINCPAC (Exclusive for CINCPAC and POLAD).

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