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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Office of Current Intelligence  
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Unification Elections in Vietnam  
As Called For Under the Geneva Accords

1. The provision for elections in 1956 looking toward reunification of North and South Vietnam was contained in a declaration of the 1954 Geneva conference rather than in the primary document signed at the conference. The Geneva agreements themselves, titled Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam, contain the provisions of a cease-fire in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and the establishment of international supervision of the cease-fire provisions.

2. Paragraph 6 of the Final Conference Declaration, appended to the agreement, stipulates that the demarcation line delineated in the agreement is related purely to a military cease-fire and in no way constitutes a political or territorial boundary. The same paragraph expresses the conference's conviction that the agreement and the final declaration create a basis for a future political settlement in Vietnam.

3. Paragraph 7 of the Final Conference Declaration contains the essence of the conference consensus that a final political settlement, based on "respect for the principles of independence, unity, and territorial integrity," will permit the Vietnamese people to enjoy freedom and democratic institutions "established as a result of free general elections by secret ballot." This paragraph expresses conference consensus that such elections "will take place in July 1956" under ICC supervision, and that consultations toward this end by "representatives of the two zones"--North and South Vietnam--should begin after 20 July 1955.

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3. In addition to the fact that neither the US Government nor the government of South Vietnam became signatories to the Geneva agreement, a specific declaration of 21 July by the US representative dissociated the US from the Final Conference Declaration with regard to the question of elections. Although this statement noted the general US intention to abide by the terms of the agreement to refrain from a renewal of hostilities, it expressed US reservations concerning the possibility of truly free elections in Vietnam. The US position was given as a Washington declaration of 29 June 1954 on "nations divided against their will," specifying that "we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections, supervised by the United Nations to assure that they are conducted freely."

4. Basic to this position was the expectation that the Communist authorities in North Vietnam would never permit genuinely free expression in any election nor effective international supervision of such elections. Moreover, at the time of partition and up to the present, North Vietnam has a population edge over the South of roughly two million persons. Additionally, the ability of the South Vietnamese Government to establish itself as a viable entity was at the time in grave doubt, and there was already reason to believe that the Communists were prepared to make every effort to subvert and undermine the regime in the south.

5. A meeting held at the Department of State on 24 July 1954--chaired by then Vice President Nixon and attended by the secretaries of State, Defense, and the Director of CIA, and representatives of the White House and Foreign Aid Administration--dealt specifically with the problems of Southeast Asia. According to the record of this meeting, Defense Secretary Wilson raised the question of elections in Vietnam in 1956 and "asked if we were likely to lose the whole country." The secretary of state observed that "in view of the population distribution...he thought we would have to take the position in 1956 that conditions were not favorable for the free expression of the will of the population." He further observed that "the fact that the people in the north would probably vote as a bloc made it extremely unlikely that the results of an election would be favorable to us."

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6. In the intervening period until 1956, important political changes took place in South Vietnam. In October 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem--serving as premier since June of the previous year--held a nationwide referendum deposing absentee Chief of State Bao Dai. South Vietnam was declared a republic and Diem installed as its first president. From its early years, South Vietnam faced formidable obstacles, including the reconstruction of a war-weary economy and popular morale, and a challenge from dissident armed sects. North Vietnam, preoccupied with its own rehabilitation during this period, sat back and waited for South Vietnam to fall into its hands. But by a near "political miracle," Diem succeeded in consolidating his position and in fashioning a highly centralized administration and a viable regime.

7. From the beginning, the Diem government took the position that, since it was not a signatory to the Geneva Accords--France signed on behalf of South Vietnam--it was not bound by the requirements of the agreements. The US supported this stand. Moreover, the international supervisory machinery, as foreseen, proved clearly inadequate to ensure genuinely free elections.

8. In backing away from the elections, Diem used two principal arguments: that Saigon, as a non-signatory, was not bound by the Geneva Accords; and that only a popularly elected assembly in South Vietnam would be competent to deal with such a vital matter. The question of elections was also linked to the eventual withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Corps, the French commander having joint responsibility with the Viet Minh commander for carrying out the Geneva agreements. The question of how much authority would pass from the French to the South Vietnamese for execution of the agreements was a moot one in which the ICC delayed taking a stand. Diem took the position that it was essential that South Vietnamese sovereignty be complete and unquestioned before any final position could be taken on unification elections.

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9. In a declaration issued on 16 July 1955, Diem--still premier at the time--did not specifically reject elections as a means of unifying Vietnam, but insisted that such elections be "genuinely free" and voiced skepticism as to whether this was possible in North Vietnam. He reiterated that South Vietnam was not bound by the Geneva agreements, and stated that his regime would not entertain any proposals from the Viet Minh until satisfied that the authorities in North Vietnam placed national interests above those of Communism. On the basis of the arguments in the 16 July declaration, Diem avoided initiating consultations with the North on the subject of the elections, contrary to the steps projected in Paragraph 7 of the Final Declaration by the Geneva Conference.

10. Diem during 1956 took further steps which strengthened his hand in ignoring proposals for reunification elections. He pressed for the withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Corps. Just prior to the departure of the French High Command, Diem declared on 6 April that his government would respect the armistice provisions undertaken by the French, but would not be bound de jure by the terms of the Geneva agreement. He authorized the drafting of a constitution for South Vietnam, to apply to all of Vietnam, thus implying no recognition of the partition of Vietnam. A National Assembly--with unfilled seats for eventual representation from North Vietnam--was elected on 4 March 1956. The carefully manipulated elections established an overwhelmingly pro-Diem assembly which strengthened the government's posture for rejecting the political solution envisaged by the Geneva conference. In a note sent on 24 May 1956 to the British--as a co-chairman of the Geneva conference--the Diem government stated that "no practical consideration" could be given to elections at that time in the absence of "all liberties" in North Vietnam. The message added that South Vietnam was seeking "practical solutions" to the problems arising from the accords to the extent compatible with its sovereignty.

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11. The Diem government issued no statement formally rejecting elections as July approached. However, on 20 July--the anniversary of the accords --the government-sponsored mass organization, the National Revolutionary Movement, issued a resolution unanimously opposing the Geneva agreements "forever," and denouncing Viet Minh offers of consultations as attempts to disorganize the "nationalist ranks" by proffering "fraudulent elections." The resolution was tantamount to official policy and complete dissociation from the Geneva agreements, domestically, while preserving, on the international plane, the Diem government's position that it continued to abide by the 1954 armistice provisions.

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