

Thieu Was Tapped by CIA

U.S. Officials Say They Had Transcripts

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The Central Intelligence Agency bugged the presidential office of South Vietnam's Nguyen Van Thieu during most of his eight years in power, according to former U.S. intelligence officials who had access to highly classified transcripts of his official meetings.

Thieu, who suspected the worst both from his U.S. allies and his Communist enemies, arranged for Vietnamese electronics experts to inspect his office on a regular basis, sometimes monthly. But according to his cousin and close aide, Hoang Duc Nha, no listening devices were ever found.

Thieu also suspected that his and other telephones were tapped. Nha said top Vietnamese officials acquired "scramblers" (telephone encoding devices) made in Europe in hopes of thwarting U.S. as well as Communist wiretappers.

Three former U.S. officials who said

they read secret transcripts of Thieu's meetings are not certain how the U.S. succeeded in bugging the Vietnamese leader's office without being detected.

One former official said he believes listening devices were planted during the construction phase of Saigon's Independence Palace, which was completed in 1966. Another former official suggested that the bug was planted after the construction of the palace was completed.

The CIA maintained a monitoring station for the Thieu bug in the U.S. embassy complex three blocks from Independence Palace, a former official said.

Key information acquired by the eavesdropping, including occasional verbatim transcripts of Vietnamese meetings, was distributed to a few of the most important U.S. officials in Saigon and Washington on an "eyes only" basis.

Ironically, middle level embassy offi-

See THIEU, A18, Col. 4

THIEU, From A1

cials in Saigon often spent weeks seeking to learn the substance of decisions that were already reported authoritatively to their U.S. superiors from the closely held eavesdropping.

Following standard practice for electronic eavesdropping, data picked up by the bug was often integrated with material from agents and open sources in intelligence reports so that it could be used without disclosing how it was acquired.

Vietnamese domestic developments as well as military moves and diplomatic strategy were often reported first by means of the palace bugging, according to former officials.

However, those acquainted with the transcripts said there were many garbled and missing passages and that some key decisions were not recorded. One former official said the palace transcripts were often just "high-level gossip confirming what we already knew."

Nha, who served as presidential assistant and personal adviser to his second cousin in 1968-74, said Thieu often walked away from his desk to the window in a far corner of his big high-ceilinged office for particularly sensitive talk.

"During negotiations [involving the U.S.] we never worked in the office but talked in the gardens or tennis courts.

When reshuffling the cabinet, he and I would go out in a boat fishing where nobody could listen, not even bodyguards . . . We started from the basic belief that everything top secret was not secure, that either the Communists bugged us or the CIA bugged us, maybe because we had read too many spy novels," said Nha, who now lives in Northern Virginia.

Nha said nearly every decision of importance was known to the U.S. mission, even without bugging, because the United States had infiltrated every level of the South Vietnamese government with paid or volunteer informants.

One matter that did not leak to the United States immediately was Thieu's crucial—and catastrophic—decision in March, 1975, to withdraw his forces suddenly from the Central Highlands. The recent memoirs of Gen Van Tien Dung, North Vietnamese army chief of staff and field commander for the final phase of the war, indicated that the Communist side obtained word of the highlands pull-out before the Americans did.

Dung's memoirs reported that the Communist command obtained information on at least one other occasion on top level meetings at Thieu's palace. American officials assume that under cover agents in high places—rather than electronic prowess—was the source of the Communist side's information.