

CIA Bugged Thieu's Office

Washington

The Central Intelligence Agency bugged the office of South Vietnam President 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 both his U.S. ally and his Communist enemies, arranged for Vietnamese electronics experts to inspect his office on a regular basis, sometimes monthly. But according to a 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. and Communist wiretappers.

Three former U.S. officials who said they read secret transcripts of Thieu's meetings are not certain how the United States succeeded in bugging the Vietnamese leader's office without being detected. One former official said that 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.

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.

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.

Nha, who served as presidential assistant and personal adviser to his second cousin from 1968 through 1974, 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 United States) 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, 29 1975, to withdraw his forces suddenly from the Central Highlands. The recent memoirs of General 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 pullout before the Americans did.

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