

**See It Through with Nguyen Van Thieu**

**SEE IT THROUGH WITH NGUYEN VAN THIEU  
THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION EMBRACES A DICTATOR, 1969-1974**

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A Dissertation Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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McMaster University DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2013), Hamilton, Ontario (History)

TITLE: See It Through with Nguyen Van Thieu: The Nixon Administration Embraces a Dictator, 1969-1974

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NUMBER OF PAGES: ix, 304

## **ABSTRACT**

Antiwar activists and Congressional doves condemned the Nixon administration for supporting South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, whom they accused of corruption, cruelty, authoritarianism, and inefficacy. To date, there has been no comprehensive analysis of Nixon's decision to prop up a client dictator with seemingly so few virtues. Joshua Lovell's dissertation addresses this gap in the literature, and argues that racism lay at the root of this policy. While American policymakers were generally contemptuous of the Vietnamese, they believed that Thieu partially transcended the alleged limitations of his race. The White House was relieved to find Thieu, who ushered South Vietnam into an era of comparative stability after a long cycle of coups. To US officials, Thieu appeared to be the only leader capable of planning and implementing crucial political, social, and economic policies, while opposition groups in Saigon's National Assembly squabbled to promote their own narrow self-interests. Thieu also promoted American-inspired initiatives, such as Nixon's controversial Vietnamization program, even though many of them weakened his government. Thieu's performance as a national leader and administrator was dubious, at best, but the Nixon administration trumpeted his minor achievements and excused his gravest flaws. Senior policymakers doubted they would find a better leader than Thieu, and they ridiculed the rest of the South Vietnamese as fractious, venal, and uncivilized. While the alliance ultimately chilled over disagreements regarding the Paris peace negotiations, Washington's perception of Thieu as a South Vietnamese superman facilitated a cordial relationship for most of Nixon's first term in office.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe debts of gratitude to a wide variety of people, without whom I could not have completed this dissertation. Professor Stephen M. Streeter provided much needed guidance as I planned and organized this project, and offered critical feedback on chapter drafts. Drs. Jaeyoon Song and Richard Stubbs similarly offered exceptional advice along the way. I am indebted to my colleagues in the graduate program at McMaster University, who provided encouragement at various junctures. I would similarly like to thank Dr. Andrew Hunt, from the University of Waterloo, for inspiring my interest in the Vietnam War in the first place.

I could not have conducted my research without the generous assistance of the staff and archivists at the LBJ Presidential Library, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, and National Archives and Records Administration. They helped me organize my investigation, and directed me to source material that I would not have otherwise found. I also owe special thanks also to “B” and Gloria Newell, who helped me navigate unfamiliar cities during prolonged visits to those archives.

I depended very heavily on my family over the course of this doctoral program. My parents, Kevin and Robbin Lovell, and brothers, Lucas and Matthew, urged me to pursue my dream and provided much needed assistance along the way. My grandparents—Burt and Eileen Lovell and Ross and Doreen Auliffe—never failed to provide much appreciated support. My partner and fiancé, Sarah Bornstein, galvanized my determination to complete this project and patiently suffered through the neuroses of a busy graduate student. Finally, I would like to thank Dylan Auliffe for serving as a

tremendous source of inspiration. Dylan's life was unjustly brief, but I will always remember him as a model of courage, strength, and determination.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

APC: Accelerated Pacification Campaign  
ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam  
BNDD: Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs  
CAP: Code for Outgoing Telegram from the White House  
CDST: Camp David Study Table  
Chron: Chronological File  
CIA: Central Intelligence Agency  
CIP: Commercial Import Program  
CNR: Committee of National Reconciliation  
CORDS: Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support  
COSVN: Central Office for South Vietnam  
CR: Congressional Record  
Deptel: Telegram from the Department of State  
Embtel: Embassy Telegram  
FRUS: Foreign Relations of the United States (series)  
FWWR: Files of Walt W. Rostow  
GVN: Government of Vietnam (used in some source material titles)  
HAK Telecons: Henry A. Kissinger Telephone Conversations  
IAC: Irregular Affairs Committee  
IMF: International Monetary Fund  
JCS: Joint Chiefs of Staff  
JUSPAO: Joint US Public Affairs Office  
LBJLM: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum  
LTTP: Land-to-the-Tiller Program  
MACV: Military Assistance Command, Vietnam  
MP: Memoranda for the President  
MPC: Military Payment Certificate  
MR: Military Region  
MTP: Memos to the President  
NARA: National Archives and Records Administration  
NCNRC: National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord  
NLF: National Liberation Front  
NSC: National Security Council  
NSCF: National Security Council Files  
NSCIF: National Security Council Institutional (“H”) Files  
NSCMM: NSC Meeting Minutes  
NSDF: National Social Democratic Front  
NSF: National Security Files  
OO: Oval Office  
PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam  
PC: Presidential Correspondence



PF: Popular Forces  
POF: President's Office Files  
POW: Prisoner of War  
PRG: People's Revolutionary Government  
PSDF: People's Self Defense Force  
RG: Record Group  
RVNAF: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces  
SMOF: Staff Member and Office Files  
TJN: Tom Johnson's Notes  
TOHAK: Telegram to Henry A. Kissinger  
US: United States  
USAID: United States Agency for International Development  
USIA: United States Information Agency  
VC: Viet Cong, derogatory term for NLF  
VCF: Vietnam Country File  
VSF: Vietnam Subject Files  
WHSF: White House Special Files  
WHT: White House Tapes  
WR: Walt Rostow

## **DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

Joshua Lovell is the sole author of this dissertation.

## INTRODUCTION

He was lying in the back of an armored personnel carrier. Once the most powerful man in the country, Ngo Dinh Diem looked quite humble on this late-fall morning. He had entered the vehicle willingly, despite his disappointment that the generals had not arrived in a limousine. Desperate times required him to sacrifice some of the conveniences of his office. The personnel carrier did not offer the safety it promised, though. Once inside, a disgruntled junior officer shot Diem in the head and stabbed his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, repeatedly. Blood splattered across Diem's face as his body fell awkwardly, his back bent forward with his hands tied behind him. He was later granted an ignoble burial in a prison cemetery. His cause of death was listed as "suicide," though the government added the adjective "accidental" after pictures of the corpse became public. His death certificate listed him as a province chief, but he had long since moved beyond this office. Until 2 November 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem had been the president of the Republic of (South) Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

Before his death, the White House had shaped its foreign policy in Vietnam around the slogan of "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem."<sup>2</sup> In late 1963, however, President John F. Kennedy and his advisers grew weary of Saigon's incurable instability

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<sup>1</sup> Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1; Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 6; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 276. See also Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 2.

and Diem's heavy-handed reactions to dissent. With approval from the White House, a cabal of South Vietnamese generals orchestrated a coup. General Duong Van Minh, also known as "Big Minh," seized power in Saigon, releasing a wave of coups and counter coups that yielded five different governments between November 1963 and June 1965. South Vietnam did not achieve a measure of stability until two young officers took control. A brash air marshal named Nguyen Cao Ky and an army general named Nguyen Van Thieu succeeded in stabilizing South Vietnam by late 1966. Both men had participated in the coup that unseated Ngo Dinh Diem. Ky originally took the top office in Saigon, but Thieu surpassed him in 1967 and stepped into the presidency.<sup>3</sup>

Kennedy died three weeks after Diem.<sup>4</sup> His successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, grew increasingly frustrated with the instability in Saigon, which threatened to undermine the anticommunist state. The Johnson administration never particularly liked any of the South Vietnamese leaders that emerged after Diem's death, including Nguyen Van Thieu. Johnson, however, did not remain in office long enough to develop faith in his new client. In 1969, just a year after and a half after taking the presidency, Thieu watched his greatest ally of the war walk into the White House. President Richard Milhous Nixon was dedicated to ending the war on terms Americans could respect, and he built his Vietnam policy around the preservation of Thieu.

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<sup>3</sup> George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, Fourth Edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 103-129, 162; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 1-4; Bui Diem with David Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 105, 121, 146-147, 171, 207; George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 195; Nguyen Cao Ky with Marvin J. Wolf, *Buddha's Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 91-99.

<sup>4</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 127-129.

Washington's decision to prop up this particular dictator was guided by a complex array of factors that shaped the entire US intervention. Hoping to contain Chinese and Soviet influence, the White House sought a fierce anti-communist who could serve as a bulwark for Western—specifically, American—power. Hoping to protect the American empire, and make it more sustainable, the Nixon administration needed a leader who could maintain the stability of South Vietnam while Washington reduced its commitments to the country. Nixon fancied himself a realist, who need not interfere with the internal policies of his allies unless it suited US interests. He therefore sought to reduce some of the burdens Washington bore in its pursuit and preservation of empire. This realignment of priorities forced the White House to rely on a strongman who could preserve order, even to the detriment of the US mission to protect South Vietnamese self-determination. As an adept political leader who enjoyed the backing of the South Vietnamese military, Thieu appeared to be the best candidate.<sup>5</sup> Nixon also credited Thieu with facilitating the Republican Party's victory in the 1968 US presidential elections. By undermining Johnson's efforts to reach a peace settlement, Thieu had hampered the campaign of the Democratic candidate, Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

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<sup>5</sup> Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 60-61; Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 142; John L. Linantud, "Pressure and Protection: Cold War Geopolitics and Nation-Building in South Korea, South Vietnam, Philippines, and Thailand," *Geopolitics* 13, no. 4 (November 2008): 635-656, p. 647; Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia Since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 157; Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 208-216

Finally, Washington backed Thieu because US officials did not think that anyone else could serve as a suitable replacement. American support for Thieu was based less on a belief that he was a perfect client—though the Nixon administration was generally pleased with his performance—than that strong leadership seemed to be in short supply in South Vietnam. Their experiences in Vietnam up to 1969 had left American officials disenchanted with Saigon's political and military leadership. The White House's support for Thieu was therefore partly based on the racist assumption that all other Vietnamese were irrational, fractious, selfish, and incompetent.

Nixon administration officials would have likely denied that they were racist in the same fashion as, say, pre-Civil War slave owners. To apply historian Seth Jacobs' phrase, racism in the Nixon administration was "historically specific." Few policymakers in the White House described the Vietnamese as a "distinct genetic group," but US officials believed that their allies embodied certain character flaws that made them inferior. Usually, those officials blamed these weaknesses on Vietnamese culture and history. As such, it might be better to describe American prejudices as "ethnocentrism." As Jacobs notes, though, ethnocentrism is "a word academics employ to avoid saying what they mean." The virulence of American prejudices toward the Vietnamese is better conveyed with a term like "racism."<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, there are good reasons to treat prejudices regarding biology and culture as conceptually identical. In both cases, elements of one society consider themselves superior to another, and attribute this hierarchy to some innate shortcoming in their

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<sup>6</sup> Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 7-14.

counterparts. These flaws are social inventions, without the backing of scientific evidence. Throughout the Cold War, American policymakers condemned foreigners as comparatively weak, irrational, mercurial, corrupt, and primitive. These perceived differences helped Americans justify extraordinary measures in conflicts abroad, particularly the employment of violence. It did not really matter whether Washington considered a given community biologically or culturally deficient, because the results were the same either way.<sup>7</sup>

Nixon's personal views on race were complex, and sometimes inconsistent. His successful electoral campaign in 1968 was based largely on a policy of courting white Southern racists who were angry with the black Civil Rights Movement. Before his presidential campaign, however, Nixon had actually been one of the Republican Party's greatest supporters of civil rights. As Dwight D. Eisenhower's vice president, Nixon

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald Horne, "Race to Insight: The United States and the World, White Supremacy and Foreign Affairs" in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. edited by Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 323-335; Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3; Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 6-7; Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 301-397; Stuart Anderson, *Race and Rapprochement: Anglo-Saxonism and Anglo-American Relations, 1895-1904* (Toronto et al: Associated University Presses, 1981); Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 176-177; Michael L. Krenn, *The Color of Empire: Race and American Foreign Relations* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2006); Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 14-15; Alana Lentin, "Replacing 'race,' historicizing 'culture' in multiculturalism," *Patterns of Prejudice* 39, no. 4 (December 2005): 379-396; David Brion Davis, "Constructing Race: A Reflection," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (January 1997): 7-18; John Solomos and Les Back, "Conceptualising Racisms: Social Theory, Politics and Research," *Sociology* 28, no. 1 (February 1994): 143-161.

helped defeat a Senate filibuster threatening civil rights legislation. He also traveled to Ghana as Washington's representative at a ceremony commemorating that country's independence, and was appointed an honorary member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in recognition of his support for black Americans. Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) claimed that Nixon's efforts to impress Southern racists in 1968 were simply shrewd politicking, or "hunting where the ducks are."<sup>8</sup>

As president, however, Nixon left a long record of racism. He referred to blacks as "niggers" and "jungle bunnies." When he was informed about a new educational program for black students, he responded, "Well it's a good thing. They're just down out of the trees." The president was also an ardent anti-Semite, believing that Jewish Americans prioritized Israeli interests over their own patriotic duties. Once, after Nixon's Jewish national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, wrapped up a Cabinet briefing on the Middle East, the president asked, "Now, can we get an American point of view?"<sup>9</sup> Kissinger, astonishingly, helped sustain the president's anti-Semitism. During a discussion on relations with Moscow, Kissinger stated that, "if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union, it is not an American concern. Maybe a humanitarian concern." Nixon could not have agreed more: "We can't blow up the world because of it."<sup>10</sup>

Nixon's prejudices were linked to faulty assumptions about both biology and culture. He claimed on numerous occasions that blacks were genetically inferior to their

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<sup>8</sup> Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 223-225.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 226-227.

<sup>10</sup> Adam Nagourney, "In tapes, Nixon Rails About Jews and Blacks," *New York Times*, 10 December 2012.



white counterparts.<sup>11</sup> He linked this alleged biological difference to the slave trade. Secretary of State William Rogers believed that blacks could strengthen the country, Nixon once explained to his assistant, Rose Mary Woods. Rogers' belief was "a decent feeling," Nixon declared, but blacks would need five hundred years to become strong. "What has to happen," Nixon said, "is they have to be, frankly, inbred." Nixon did not restrict his prejudices to the descendants of slaves. Indeed, he argued in February 1973 that, "I've just recognized that, you know, all people have certain traits." For example, the "Irish can't drink. What you always have to remember with the Irish is they get mean. Virtually every Irish I've known gets mean when he drinks. Particularly the real Irish." Of course, the Irish were not the worst of the European lot to Nixon's mind. "The Italians, of course, those people... don't have their heads screwed on tight."<sup>12</sup>

Nixon was not the only member of his administration to harbor such prejudices. When Roger Morris, a member of the National Security Council (NSC), prepared to present a briefing on African issues, he noted that General Alexander Haig, Kissinger's deputy, "would begin to beat his hands on the table, as if he were pounding a tom-tom." Morris also heard numerous comments about apes and smells, which seem to have pervaded the White House. On his way to a dinner for African ambassadors, one night, Kissinger asked Senator J. William Fulbright, "I wonder what the dining room is going to smell like?"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 226-227.

<sup>12</sup> Nagourney, "In tapes, Nixon Rails About Jews and Blacks."

<sup>13</sup> Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 228.

The Nixon administration's condemnations of the Vietnamese were usually, though not always, framed in terms of culture. American policymakers lamented that the Vietnamese were too suspicious or manipulative for their own good. The Vietnamese allegedly developed these traits because evasiveness allowed them to survive their long history of fighting off powerful foreign invaders. Washington also criticized the South Vietnamese for allowing their vanity or selfish desires to override political pragmatism. As Saigon's policymaking elites debated major national policies, US officials vented about an inherent Vietnamese predisposition toward factionalism that stalled critical wartime programs. Worse still, the Vietnamese seemed incapable of implementing policies efficiently or effectively, even when they could reach a consensus.

American officials sometimes framed their criticisms in gendered language, but such discourses were rooted in racism. Senior policymakers scoffed at Vietnamese caution in military campaigns or the peace process, and suggested that Washington's allies needed to act with greater confidence, strength, or other stereotypically masculine traits. Similarly, US officials sometimes took it upon themselves to offer guidance to the Vietnamese, using language reminiscent of father-child relationships. In these cases, Washington policymakers portrayed the Vietnamese as immature, instead of feminine, men. The White House also made war plans without consulting its allies, which in some cases suggested that the Vietnamese were too childish to be trusted with their own

defense. While important on their own, these gendered discourses emerged within a much broader and more detailed dialogue regarding South Vietnamese racial inferiority.<sup>14</sup>

The White House's prejudices toward the Vietnamese reflected popular opinions. In 1969, the media discovered that American soldiers had slaughtered innocent civilians in the Vietnamese village of My Lai. The military covered up this story for over a year, but laid charges against Lieutenant William J. Calley for murdering seventy "Oriental human beings" after news of the massacre broke. The American public was more concerned about US soldiers than foreign victims, and many assumed that Vietnam was causing the kind of moral decline that resulted in the My Lai Massacre. Many Americans, including Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, portrayed Calley as a scapegoat. After Calley was sentenced, Carter asked Georgians to keep their headlights on when they drove, in order to "honor the flag" as Calley had. Some soldiers who had been honorably discharged gasped in disbelief at Calley's trial. "The people back in the world don't understand this war," one soldier said. "We are here to kill dinks. How can they convict Calley for killing dinks? That's our job."<sup>15</sup> Even if they were not involved directly in criminal slaughter, many Americans referred to the Vietnamese as "gooks" or "slopes."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The role of gender in US foreign relations has been well established. See, for example: Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Geoffrey F. Smith, "Security, Gender, and the Historical Process," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 1 (January 1994): 79-90; Robert A. Nye, "Review Essay: Western Masculinities in War and Peace," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 2 (April 2007): 417-38; and Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 229-230.

<sup>16</sup> Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 176-177.

Despite these prejudices, there was at least one Vietnamese leader who earned the Nixon administration's respect. After Ngo Dinh Diem's death, South Vietnam was consumed by political turmoil. By 1967, however, Nguyen Van Thieu emerged as the undisputed leader of the country. The South Vietnamese president quelled the national turbulence, and seemed both capable and willing to implement American policy advice. The White House praised Thieu for being pragmatic, reasonable, and energetic, while condemning South Vietnamese opposition leaders for absurd obstructionism. Thieu had many flaws, and US officials easily identified them. Nixon and his advisers frequently expressed frustration with Thieu's slow, cautious approach to political reforms. They also noted that Thieu seemed to share an alleged Vietnamese obsession with prestige and status. As such, he could not promote policies unless the public believed that he was acting on his own volition, free of American pressure. Thieu also worried about the very significant opposition he faced over controversial policies like austerity taxes and American troop withdrawals. He was therefore slow to implement such policies.

Seth Jacobs argues that Ngo Dinh Diem had faced similar prejudices from US officials, but his Catholicism and capacity to transcend the perceived limitations of his race allowed him to maintain American support. The White House rationalized Diem's authoritarianism and brutality as products of an inferior Asian culture, but praised him for taking a strong pro-Western stance in a country where communism and neutralism were both popular.<sup>17</sup> Several years later, Thieu benefited from a similar dynamic. American officials believed that, while Thieu was too cautious, he was still a more effective leader

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<sup>17</sup> Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 11-16.

than any of his predecessors since Diem. If he was an oppressive tyrant, it was because he was a traditional mandarin in a nation wracked by discord. If he sometimes acted unwisely, he was far more reasonable than South Vietnamese civilian leaders, communists, or neutralists. An American might have been bolder, smarter, and more effective, but Americans could not govern in Saigon. The White House believed that Thieu manifested the perceived character flaws of his race, but he could also break past them.

Vietnamese stereotypes seemed to explain the weaknesses of Saigon's political leaders. Such prejudices could also serve as a moral salve, when a realism-driven White House sustained support for a tyrannical and authoritarian regime in Saigon. Indeed, the high frequency with which US officials referenced alleged South Vietnamese character and cultural flaws suggests that they were convincing themselves of the righteousness of their actions. The Nixon administration's racism therefore constituted not only a set of faulty assumptions that skewed evaluations of the Vietnamese, but also a process of justifying American actions in Vietnam over the protests of external figures and individual consciences.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This process has been observed in other arenas. Edward Said, for example, argues that prejudices regarding Asians have justified efforts to dominate and re-order societies in the region. Racism is thus a critical component of empire. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 3. Similarly, Tami Davis Biddle argues that decision makers tend to discount the drawbacks of certain options, in order to make repugnant choices more palatable. When these choices are particularly off-putting, decision makers raise cognitive barriers that make reconsideration more difficult. See Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4-6

Despite the great effort exerted by the White House to support the South Vietnamese president, accounts of the Nixon-Thieu relationship remain limited largely because the requisite archival material was only recently declassified. While there have been few scholarly inquiries into this relationship, Thieu has not been completely left out of the story of the Vietnam War. Political scientist Larry Berman explores Thieu's perspectives on the peace process in *No Peace, No Honor*. Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold Schecter do the same in *The Palace File*, an exceptional work crafted without the benefit of Nixon's national security files. Stanley Karnow briefly explains Thieu's wartime roles in *Vietnam: A History*, as does Gabriel Kolko in his magisterial survey, *Anatomy of a War*. Howard B. Schaffer, a former US diplomat, describes the American ambassador's relationship with Thieu in *Ellsworth Bunker*. Schaffer demonstrates that Bunker was unjustifiably accommodating of Saigon's strongman, but the author's focus on the embassy prevents him from conducting a comprehensive analysis of opinions of Thieu in the White House. Jeffrey Kimball argues in *Nixon's Vietnam War* that Nixon bolstered the Saigon regime because it was stable, and because Thieu could potentially embarrass his counterpart over a Republican plot to derail the 1968 peace negotiations. Kimball's book is limited by his focus on broader wartime strategy. As such, he does not explore the full dynamics of the Nixon-Thieu alliance.<sup>19</sup> Other historians comment on Thieu over the course of their narratives, but they do not address his role in great detail.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, especially 208-222; Karnow, *Vietnam*; Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 87-91; Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold R. Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986); Howard B. Schaffer, *Ellsworth Bunker: Global*

There is as yet no scholarly work dedicated specifically to Nixon's relationship with Nguyen Van Thieu. This dissertation is designed to help fill that gap. It is based on American sources alone, and therefore does not amplify significantly on Thieu's perspectives on the war or his allies. Such a study would no doubt be useful, and scholars should look forward to the day when the relevant Vietnamese archival records become available. This dissertation nonetheless contributes to the field by addressing a major question about American foreign policy. One of the most important decisions hegemony make in proxy wars is the choice of a client. The US media and public regarded Thieu with contempt, so the Nixon administration's support for him is puzzling. Surely, there must have been alternative candidates for the presidency of South Vietnam.

While such figures may have existed, the Nixon administration never devoted significant attention to them. Convinced that most South Vietnamese were selfish, venal, corrupt, and ineffective, the most important US policymakers were largely satisfied with Thieu's performance. He was friendly and cooperative, in sharp contrast to some of his predecessors, and he was at least partially successful at achieving his major policy goals. Some of his efforts, such as his land and economic reforms, did not actually resolve

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*Troubleshooter, Vietnam Hawk* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 160-259.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example: Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1972); C.L. Sulzberger, *The World and Richard Nixon* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987); Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991); George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*; Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

Saigon's problems. American perceptions of his successes, however, seem more important than the actual outcomes of his policies. Whenever he managed to force a bill past his political opposition, Thieu strengthened his reputation in the White House as a strong leader. The negative consequences of some of those new laws for the South Vietnamese public did not necessarily tarnish the Nixon-Thieu relationship.

Nixon's predecessor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, occupied the White House while Thieu rose to power in Saigon. Taking office just after Diem's assassination, the Johnson administration grew disappointed with the series of South Vietnamese governments that emerged between late 1963 and mid-1965. Ineffective and fragile, these regimes were neither capable of defeating their enemies nor stymieing internal conflict. When Nguyen Cao Ky emerged as prime minister, he settled much of the conflict among Saigon's military brass. The Johnson administration did not particularly respect him, either, though. He was prone to making outrageous statements, and failed to fulfill his promise to initiate a grand social revolution to improve the lives of his people. When Thieu ascended to the presidency in 1967, he also failed to win Johnson's respect. His feud with Ky for the top office and his lethargic response to a military crisis in 1968 reinforced American assumptions that the Vietnamese were selfish and incapable of promoting their own interests.

When Johnson pushed for a peace agreement in late 1968, however, he realized that Thieu was a stronger force than the White House had previously understood. Saigon successfully blocked the peace initiative, which helped propel Richard Nixon into the White House. The Nixon campaign may have tried to encourage Thieu along this path. If



Johnson's peace initiative failed, Nixon's odds of winning the US presidential election would be greatly increased. Working through an envoy named Anna Chennault, Nixon promised Thieu that the Republicans would be far friendlier to Saigon than the Democrats. Thieu had his own reasons to obstruct the 1968 peace deal, and there is little evidence that Chennault had significant influence over Saigon. Since the negotiations stalled, however, Nixon felt indebted to Thieu, and perhaps wary that Saigon would release details of the Republicans' skullduggery. When Nixon took office, he intended to reward Thieu's apparent cooperation in the Anna Chennault Affair.

In 1969, therefore, President Nixon devoted his administration to a policy of rapprochement with Thieu. The new team in the White House was generally more satisfied with Saigon's performance than the Democrats had been. Thieu's friendly cooperation with Washington earned him significant goodwill, as did his willingness to promote economic reforms, Nixon's Vietnamization strategy, a reinvigorated pacification campaign, a new land reform initiative, and a negotiations strategy that aligned with Nixon's call for an "honorable peace."<sup>21</sup> These policies were not always successful, but American racism helped protect Thieu's reputation. Officials in the White House and Embassy Saigon praised Thieu when he overcame domestic opposition to implement a desired program, and treated him like a South Vietnamese superman. By comparison, when Thieu was unable to defeat his domestic opponents, senior US policymakers condemned the fractious National Assembly and junior South Vietnamese bureaucrats for alleged venality and ineptitude.

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<sup>21</sup> Nixon used the phrase "honorable peace" at the very outset of his presidency, in January 1969. Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 5.

Sometimes, Thieu opposed US-inspired programs instead of promoting them. The US ambassador to Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker, was disappointed with Thieu's failure to broaden his base of domestic support by creating an alliance of political parties and making his Cabinet more socially diverse. Bunker held many of the same prejudices as his colleagues in Washington, however, and remained mostly pleased with Thieu's performance. Nixon was a devotee of *realpolitik*, the principle that national interests should take priority over all other considerations. He did not believe that interfering in South Vietnam's internal affairs was in America's interest, nor did National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. Nixon centralized the decision-making process for Vietnam policies in the Oval Office and NSC, so his opinion and Kissinger's mattered more than those of other senior policymakers. Since neither Nixon nor Kissinger cared very much about the failed nation-building programs, Thieu maintained his reputation in the White House as a superior South Vietnamese leader.

The dynamics that characterized the Nixon-Thieu relationship in 1969 persisted into the next year, but the strategic environment in Vietnam turned grim. Thieu continued to deliver policy successes in 1970. He implemented austerity measures, despite continued domestic opposition, and maintained his support for US troop withdrawals. He also succeeded in passing legislation for the Land-to-the-Tiller Program, a land reform project designed to build public support for the government. These efforts infuriated Thieu's domestic opposition, however, which was already upset at his heavy-handed repression of dissidents and protection of corrupt officials. The political stability that Thieu had maintained for years seemed to be unraveling. After a joint US-South

Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia yielded uninspiring results, the White House began to doubt that it could win the war through military pressure alone.

Worried that Saigon's strength was waning, and that the loss of South Vietnam would seriously jeopardize American credibility as a global power, Nixon and Kissinger began to contemplate a grand betrayal of Thieu. Under this scheme, Washington would provide just enough aid to allow its client to survive for a few years after all US troops had left Vietnam. If Saigon fell to the communists after a "decent interval," Nixon could not be held responsible. Scholars have engaged in a vigorous debate about whether or how relentlessly Nixon pursued the decent interval strategy. The consequences for the Nixon-Thieu relationship, however, would have been the same regardless of the White House's decision. Nixon decided in late 1970 to reaffirm and enhance his commitment to Nguyen Van Thieu, either because he needed a strongman in Saigon to maintain stability for a decent interval, or because he wanted to preserve a permanent government in a tumultuous war zone.

In 1971, therefore, the Nixon administration attempted to further strengthen the Thieu regime. Washington provided American assets to assist Thieu's campaign during the South Vietnamese presidential election. Nixon even modified the schedule of American troop withdrawals, so that South Vietnamese voters would feel safe on Election Day. Officials in both Washington and the US embassy in Saigon protested when Thieu drove his competition out of the contest, but they rallied to his side when he orchestrated a one-man election. If ever the Nixon administration had an opportunity to replace Thieu with someone else, the 1971 election was it. American officials never gave any serious

thought to such a plan because they were convinced that all of the other candidates were weak, incompetent, and misguided. Even as the Nixon administration worried that its client state was collapsing, Thieu maintained his status as an exceptional South Vietnamese specimen.

Thieu's re-election did not convince Nixon that he no longer needed to consider a decent interval strategy. Other efforts to strengthen the Thieu regime failed, though US officials hoped that the South Vietnamese president could reinvigorate some of these programs after he secured a second term in office. Nixon's War on Drugs, for example, was designed in part to repair Thieu's reputation at home and abroad. Widely considered corrupt, and accused of participating in the drug trade, Thieu needed to improve his public image. His regime was built on a pyramid of corruption, however, where tolerance for certain criminal practices allowed junior officials to secure the patronage of their superiors. Thieu could not attack narcotics traffickers without compromising many of the people who owed him allegiance. Pacification, which was relegated to lower echelons of both the South Vietnamese and American governments in 1971, floundered as well. Finally, North Vietnamese soldiers routed their Southern counterparts when the latter invaded Laos. While Thieu promoted the White House's claim that the invasion was a tremendous success, Nixon and Kissinger were still deeply troubled about the prospects of achieving peace with honor. They continued to mull over a potential decent interval solution. While Thieu discerned some of the details of the American negotiating strategy, he did not yet know the full extent of Nixon's scheming.

Despite the new tensions developing in the Nixon-Thieu relationship, the alliance remained strong through the first part of 1972. When Hanoi launched the Spring Offensive, an ambitious invasion of the South, Washington came to Saigon's aid. Thieu's performance as a leader was far more impressive this time than during the 1968 Tet Offensive, though he still lost some territory to the enemy. The Spring Offensive also convinced Washington and Hanoi that it was time to earnestly pursue a peace settlement, however, which was finally signed in January 1973. Thieu vehemently opposed this settlement because it put his government at political and military disadvantages. The Nixon administration was baffled by this resistance, and promised Thieu he would have the full support of the United States if Hanoi violated a peace treaty. When such promises failed to bring Thieu along, US officials voiced their prejudices toward the Vietnamese in brutal, virulent terms. No longer convinced that Thieu was a South Vietnamese superman, Nixon and Kissinger lashed out with threats and insults. Eventually, Thieu conceded defeat, but the American alliance with Saigon had been shattered and South Vietnamese security was fatally compromised.

While the US intervention was finally over, the Paris Peace Accords did not settle the war for the Vietnamese. Both parties violated the ceasefire, and Hanoi finally secured victory with the Ho Chi Minh Offensive of 1975. Nixon met Thieu in San Clemente, California, shortly after the Accords were signed. The US president renewed his pledge to retaliate against communist ceasefire violations, but he never again sent American soldiers to Vietnam. Soon distracted by the Watergate scandal, Nixon devoted less attention to Saigon. Gerald R. Ford replaced Nixon as president, when the latter was

forced to resign in disgrace. Ford lacked the political capital necessary to overcome Congressional and public opposition to a renewed commitment to Vietnam, and he never met with Thieu. The South Vietnamese president fled Saigon just before the city fell to the communists. The American war in Vietnam was finally over.

Nixon did not fight the Vietnam War simply because he was racist, and there were certainly elements of realpolitik in his sustained support for a dictatorial client. American prejudices, however, helped the White House choose Thieu over potential alternatives. Officials in the White House and Embassy Saigon believed that the Vietnamese were innately inferior to Americans. Nixon and his advisers complained bitterly throughout the war about Vietnamese factionalism, incompetence, and venality. Thieu did not conform perfectly to this stereotype, and so convinced Americans that he had transcended his racial weaknesses. At the same time, the Nixon administration's bigotry protected Thieu from criticism regarding his brutal repression, tolerance of corruption, and electioneering. He may have been an exceptional leader, US officials thought, but he was still Vietnamese. He could not escape his basic nature. Even when the Vietnam War seemed to turn against the allies, and Nixon was forced to consider a terrible betrayal, Washington held on to Nguyen Van Thieu. Poor performance and brutality could not tarnish the reputation of Saigon's superman. The Nixon-Thieu relationship was only dissolved when American and South Vietnamese national interests clashed directly.

## **CHAPTER 1: THE RISE OF NGUYEN VAN THIEU, 1964-1968**

When Lyndon Baines Johnson took over the US presidency, he faced a precarious strategic environment in South Vietnam. America's strongman in Saigon, Ngo Dinh Diem, fell to assassins three weeks prior to John F. Kennedy's tragic death. Over the next year and a half, the fledgling nation was wracked by instability, falling under the sway of no fewer than five different governments. As the Republic of Vietnam struggled to fill the power vacuum Diem left, it suffered debilitating losses to the insurgents of the National Liberation Front (NLF). Described derisively by their enemies as Viet Cong (VC), for Vietnamese communists, the Front comprised a diverse group of nationalists seeking to overthrow the government in Saigon.<sup>1</sup>

The NLF's achievements in the field put the survival of South Vietnam at risk, and it was not until 1965 that leaders strong enough to hold the South together seized power. Even then, the Johnson administration expressed frustration with the South Vietnamese government. American officials assumed that South Vietnam was incapable of rational political development, so they instead focused on finding a leader who would maintain stability. Nguyen Van Thieu eventually emerged to fulfill this role, but he too failed to earn Johnson's respect. While Richard Nixon later embraced Thieu as a superior national leader, the Johnson administration considered Saigon's new strongman just another manifestation of South Vietnamese backwardness. Thieu was stronger than the Johnson administration expected, though, as he demonstrated by derailing the 1968 peace process. An ardent nationalist, Thieu refused to negotiate in good faith with the North

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<sup>1</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 127, 133, 140, 151-152, 162.

Vietnamese and NLF. Never satisfied with his client in South Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson now lacked the power to force Thieu's compliance with American policies.

Racism was not the sole cause of the Johnson administration's frustrations with Saigon. The South Vietnamese government was weak and too focused on internal political challenges to fight its enemies effectively. As such, there were perfectly rational reasons for the White House to express frustration with its client. The Johnson administration's prejudices exacerbated those tensions, though, and seemingly explained Saigon's political instability. After complaining that South Vietnamese civilization was weak and under-developed, the White House abandoned its lofty goals for a democratic, civilian government in Saigon, and instead relied on dictators who could maintain order.

## **LYNDON JOHNSON'S VIETNAM WAR**

Johnson's predecessor, John F. Kennedy, was an ardent Cold War hawk who had tried to arrest the spread of communism by offering economic and military assistance to modernize the Third World. American officials believed that developing countries were "primitive" and "childlike," compared to the "advanced" West, and thus vulnerable to communist subversion. According to Kennedy adviser Walt Rostow, as primitive societies evolved toward more advanced economic models, "individual men are torn between the commitment to the old familiar way of life and the attractions of a modern way of life." Rostow argued that communists took advantage of such instabilities to pervert the modernization process. Kennedy's foreign aid programs were therefore



designed to protect countries like Vietnam from communist subversion by accelerating their evolution toward Americanized capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

Lyndon Johnson shared many of Rostow's views of the developing world, and followed his predecessor's commitment to nation building as a defense against communism. With a hyper-masculine desire to stand up to the communist "bully," Johnson wanted to uplift "young and unsophisticated nations" from the torments of "hunger, ignorance, poverty, and disease."<sup>3</sup> To Johnson's mind, Vietnam fell perfectly within that rubric of unsophisticated countries. He once referred to North Vietnam as a "raggedy-ass, little fourth-rate country."<sup>4</sup> He was no more generous with the South Vietnamese, whom Johnson regarded as primitive, fractious, and completely irrational.<sup>5</sup>

While Johnson phrased his goals for the Third World in altruistic terms of protection and development, he never lost sight of his ultimate goal: containing communism. As such, he did not always apply American democratic models in Vietnam. Johnson's focus on the Cold War competition led him to diverge from Kennedy's policy

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen M. Streeter, "The US-Led Globalization Project in the Third World: The Struggle for Hearts and Minds in Guatemala and Vietnam in the 1960s," in *Empires and Autonomy: Moments in the History of Globalization*, edited by Stephen M. Streeter, John C. Weaver, and William D. Coleman, 196-211 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 196-199. See also, Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*; David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); and David Engerman et al (ed.), *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 75-76. See also Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 201-240.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 104-105.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 243.

in two important ways. First, whereas Kennedy hesitated to adopt a significant combat role in Vietnam, Johnson accepted such a sacrifice as a necessary condition for victory. Second, Johnson was more devoted to maintaining order when nation-building projects floundered. He thus fervently opposed Kennedy's guidance of the November 1963 coup in Saigon. Ngo Dinh Diem had been a brutal dictator with limited popular support, but Johnson credited him with stabilizing South Vietnam. During a visit to that country in 1961, Johnson even compared Diem to a heroic Winston Churchill.<sup>6</sup>

The Johnson administration was never completely comfortable with any of the five South Vietnamese governments that emerged after Diem's death. Evaluating these regimes through the prisms of their personal prejudices, US officials concluded that the Vietnamese were neither efficient nor competent. Two senior South Vietnamese military officers, Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu, finally ended the cycle of coups and counter coups in 1965, but Saigon continued to face dramatic political and military crises through 1968. The tenuous stability that emerged in South Vietnam, moreover, cost Johnson his nation-building project. As the generals in Saigon's Independence Palace competed with each other for power, they failed to implement the policies that Johnson believed would strengthen Saigon's claim to sovereignty. South Vietnam finally achieved a stable government just as the Johnson administration collapsed. The US president tried to negotiate a peace agreement before the end of his term, but Thieu thwarted him. Saigon then saw a new, seemingly friendlier ally step into the White House, in the form of Richard Nixon.

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<sup>6</sup> Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 75-79; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), 52-54.

## YOUNG TURKS

In the fall of 1964, South Vietnam was still struggling to fill the power vacuum that Ngo Dinh Diem's death had created, but a group of young military officers was emerging as a strong political force. Chief among these Young Turks was a thirty-five year old air marshal named Nguyen Cao Ky. He had the support of another rising star: forty-two year old army General Nguyen Van Thieu. The Young Turks were ambitious, and sought additional power and authority. They lobbied their embattled junta leader, Nguyen Khanh, to make room for fresh military leadership by firing several senior generals.<sup>7</sup>

Khanh was a career soldier, not the kind of able administrator needed to unify South Vietnam's competing political and religious factions. Catholics accused Khanh of discrimination after he fired several key officials. Buddhists comprised the largest share of the non-Catholic population, which also included groups such as the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects. The Buddhists opposed both Catholic ambitions and Khanh's authoritarianism. The stability of the country was seriously threatened, so Khanh—under pressure from US Ambassador Maxwell Taylor—began to build a constitutional framework for his government. He established a High National Council of veteran statesmen to draft a constitution and appointed an elderly nationalist, Phan Khac Suu, his chief of state. The ancient Tran Van Huong became prime minister. As a result of these institutional changes, Khanh could not act unilaterally when the Young Turks' demanded

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<sup>7</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, p. 121; Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 186.

that he fire Generals Le Van Kim, Tran Van Don, Duong Van “Big” Minh, and others. Suu needed to sign the decree before it could become official, and the new chief of state adamantly refused Khanh’s request.<sup>8</sup>

Their ambitions stifled, the Young Turks took matters into their own hands, demonstrating that Taylor’s lectures to Khanh about creating a stable civilian government carried little weight. On December 20, claiming they were responding to rumors of a coup against Suu, the Young Turks kidnapped the High National Councilmen and shipped them to Pleiku.<sup>9</sup> Taylor exploded when he found out what had happened. He told the Young Turks that Washington was “tired of coups,” and warned them that the White House could not support Saigon if the generals continued to act rashly. The ambassador then announced that because Khanh had become too much of a problem for Washington, it might not be possible for the United States to maintain its support for him.<sup>10</sup> Khanh sensed an opportunity to earn some goodwill among the Vietnamese, and rose to the Young Turks’ defense. Much to Taylor’s chagrin, Khanh suggested that Washington should recall its ambassador to Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

Khanh’s ploy failed, and he did not remain in power much longer. On 14 February 1965, he dissolved the current government and asked Dr. Phan Huy Quat to build a new administration. While civilians technically led this new government, Khanh retained control over the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and through it controlled

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<sup>8</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 119-121; Ky with Wolf, *Buddha’s Child*, 109; Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 248-256.

<sup>9</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 122; Ky with Wolf, *Buddha’s Child*, 110.

<sup>10</sup> Gardner, *Pay any Price*, 159-160.

<sup>11</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 122.

much of South Vietnamese policymaking. Unfortunately for Khanh, Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao and General Lam Van tried to usurp power, proving that South Vietnamese stability remained fragile. Khanh sought out Ky for protection, but the attempted coup marked the end of Khanh's reign. Thao and Van agreed to cease their efforts in exchange for Khanh's resignation and exile. With the junta leader gone, the Young Turks were now the dominant military faction in South Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

Prime Minister Quat survived only long enough to oversee Lyndon Johnson's introduction of combat troops into Vietnam. As a northerner, Quat's leadership in Saigon frustrated many southerners, so he was never able to rally all of the rival military and civilian factions in South Vietnam. While Quat successfully secured an agreement to dissolve the Armed Forces Council, the body through which the military had influenced government policy since the Khanh era, civilian control of the Republic of Vietnam was tenuous. Ky had already made it clear that the military would seize power if the civilians did anything that he considered treasonous. The dissolution of the Armed Forces Council did not change the balance of power in Saigon. Lacking a strong popular base or military support, Quat stood on a precipice. He finally fell from power after he tried to replace two of his Cabinet ministers. When southern politicians successfully discouraged Suu from signing the termination orders, government operations ground to a halt.<sup>13</sup>

The Young Turks stepped in to resolve the impasse and, after a three-hour meeting on 12 June 1965, Ky dispatched an aide to announce that Quat was resigning in favor of military rule. Ky accepted the mantle of prime minister and appointed Thieu his

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 122-123.

<sup>13</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 124-147; Gardner, *Pay any Price*, 175-176.

chief of state. Ky stood in the spotlight, and Thieu's status as chief of state was largely ceremonial. Thieu also chaired a committee of officers called the Directorate, however, which served as the real authority in South Vietnam. Through the Directorate, Thieu exercised considerable influence over government policies. The White House was not particularly fond of Quat, so few US officials protested this coup. Taylor simply shrugged off the coup under the rationalization that the military would always rule the Republic of Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> Undersecretary of State George Ball was an exception; he argued that the latest coup demonstrated that South Vietnam was too weak to remain stable, even with American aid. "These people are clowns," he lamented.<sup>15</sup>

The Johnson administration became divided over the quality of the new Ky regime. Deputy Ambassador Alex Johnson described Ky as an "unguided missile," and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara condemned the South Vietnamese prime minister, who "drank, gambled, and womanized heavily." Ky unnerved US officials because of his flashy dress (he wore a "zippered black flying suit belted with twin pearl-handled revolvers") and his tendency to make outrageous statements.<sup>16</sup> He told London's *Sunday Mirror*, for example, that he admired Hitler, who "pulled his country together when it was in a terrible state." To stave off the communist threat, Ky proclaimed, "We

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<sup>14</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 146-147, 158; Gardner, *Pay any Price*, 224-225; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 138; Kahin, *Intervention*, 344-345.

<sup>15</sup> Gardner, *Pay any Price*, 224-225.

<sup>16</sup> McNamara with VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 186.

need four or five Hitlers in Vietnam.”<sup>17</sup> Despite such hyperbole, President Johnson appreciated Ky and Thieu’s capacity to maintain stability after an extended period of chaos. Johnson was also heartened by Ky’s promise to defeat the enemy, rebuild the countryside, stabilize the economy, and improve South Vietnamese democracy.<sup>18</sup> Ky appealed to Johnson’s highest priorities for Vietnam: stability and Americanized nation building. Perhaps because LBJ held such high hopes for what could be accomplished in South Vietnam, he was particularly disenchanted when Ky failed to deliver.

Most US officials grew anxious about the South Vietnamese leaders who succeeded Diem. Alex Johnson regarded the Young Turks as xenophobic nationalists who had grown weary of democracy. The deputy ambassador reported that the new government underestimated the complexity of the policy challenges it faced, and overestimated the capacity of its bureaucracy to implement Saigon’s orders. Maxwell Taylor appeared grateful that Ky seemed genuinely intent on mobilizing his country for war, but he considered the young airman too immature and inexperienced for the prime minister’s office.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *Congressional Record* [Hereafter, *CR*], 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1965. Vol. 111, pt. 12, S: 17146-17154.

<sup>18</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 242.

<sup>19</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 13 June 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [Hereafter, *FRUS*], June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 2; Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 17 June 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 5. Documents from *FRUS* that are available in print or PDF format will include page numbers before the document number. All documents that do not include page numbers are available online as HTML files.

Ky and Thieu had to face all of the old tensions that had destroyed the previous regimes that emerged after 1963. The military remained fractious. The new Cabinet seemed competent, but there were many competing political factions. Catholics were wary of Ky, a Buddhist, and Buddhists disliked Thieu, a Catholic. Taylor regarded the new regime as unwieldy. He noted that the government's decisions were divided among numerous committees, and doubted that Ky would prove capable of managing all of them. Taylor resigned himself to supporting Ky, however, in the belief that this regime was probably the best Washington could achieve for the moment.<sup>20</sup>

Taylor's assessments of Ky were partially colored by his distaste for the South Vietnamese. In a long letter to Ky, he described the military and economic problems he wanted corrected. He concluded by raising an issue that he had addressed on many occasions with Ky. Taylor lamented the filth and dirt in Saigon, and asked Ky to resolve this matter. "Cleanliness," Taylor wrote, "is a mark of pride and self respect...."<sup>21</sup> Taylor's disgust was clear, and his insinuation that the South Vietnamese were dirty and lacking in self-respect insulting. As historians Gail Bederman and Michael Krenn have demonstrated, white men have often contrasted their cleanliness with the alleged filth of non-white communities.<sup>22</sup> Taylor's lecture was a critique of what he considered Vietnamese primitivism.

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<sup>20</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 21 June 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 9.

<sup>21</sup> Letter From the Ambassador to Vietnam (Taylor) to Prime Minister Ky, 1 July 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 37.

<sup>22</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 207-211; Krenn, *The Color of Empire*, 54.



McNamara waxed skeptical about the merits of the Ky regime. In a memorandum to President Johnson on July 20, he claimed that Saigon's position in the war was deteriorating rapidly. McNamara argued that the new South Vietnamese government was not at all sufficient to meet current needs, but if the military stayed loyal and Vietnam's various religious factions remained "quiescent," Ky could hold onto power. Otherwise, South Vietnam would again fall prey to internal conflict and Saigon might ineptly try to negotiate a peace treaty with the North Vietnamese. As Johnson escalated the American troop presence in South Vietnam, McNamara recommended that US advisers press Ky into making reforms.<sup>23</sup>

Carl Rowan, director of the US Information Agency (USIA), worried that the Ky regime could sink the American war effort. "Unless we put the screws on the Ky government," he said, "175,000 men will do us no good." The man who soon replaced Maxwell Taylor as ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., concurred. He decried South Vietnamese backwardness, and recommended that the White House avoid letting Ky hinder American foreign policy. "There is no tradition of a national government in Saigon," he said. "There are no roots in the country." The ambassador doubted that the South Vietnamese government could accomplish much of significance until a strong leader emerged, and he was skeptical that any such figure was available. "There is no one who can do anything." Lodge argued that Washington should take whatever actions it required to promote American interests, whether the South

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<sup>23</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson, 20 July 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 67.

Vietnamese liked it or not. He did not believe Saigon was sufficiently competent to define and promote its own interests.<sup>24</sup>

To some degree, Ky benefitted from these pessimistic assessments. When Lodge took over Embassy Saigon in the summer, he tried to establish a cordial and productive relationship with Ky. While disenchanted with Ky's capacity to rally public support over the next several months, Lodge held him to a low standard. The ambassador praised Ky for such banal feats as speaking proper English and staying in power for several months.<sup>25</sup> Ky may have been a weak leader, but he surpassed Lodge's lowered expectations.

Ky eventually convinced Lodge that he had the potential to grow as a national leader, though South Vietnam's future remained in doubt. In October 1965, Lodge wrote that Ky's administrative and political skills were rapidly improving. If the young prime minister could avoid a coup, the ambassador mused, he could become "a first class political leader." Lodge's praise for Ky was effusive: "If there are [governments] in this world which have a man of much better quality and potential than General Ky, then I do not know what they are."<sup>26</sup> Nguyen Cao Ky had many flaws, but he was a stabilizing

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<sup>24</sup> Notes of Meeting, 21 July 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 71.

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum for President Johnson, Undated, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 128; Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 4 September 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 134; Memorandum by Chester L. Cooper of the National Security Council Staff, 10 September 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 138; Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 22 September 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 146; Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 13 October 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 165.

<sup>26</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 20 October 1965, *FRUS*, June-December 1965, Vol. III: Document 172; Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 7 January 1966, *FRUS*, 1966, Vol. IV: Document 10.

force in country wracked with instabilities. By managing to avoid a coup, he seemingly justified American support for him.

## **HONOLULU, GUAM, AND MANILA**

While Ky managed to hold onto power longer than his post-Diem predecessors, he was unable to broaden his popular base of support, and thus provide the Republic of Vietnam with democratic legitimacy. Johnson, one of America's greatest advocates of social reform, expressed deep frustration with this failure. As a young congressman, Johnson had championed President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal; as president, he wanted to promote the Great Society, a program that included civil rights legislation, a war on poverty, improved education and health care services, environmental protection laws, and various other reforms.<sup>27</sup> The president regretted that the Vietnam War distracted him from this ambitious agenda. After he retired, Johnson famously complained about "that bitch of a war on the other side of the world" that prevented him from focusing on "the woman I really loved—the Great Society."<sup>28</sup> His unruly Vietnamese mistress prevented him from protecting his legislative agenda. The president wanted Ky to improve the lot of the South Vietnamese, but was disturbed by Saigon's lack of progress on this front. Johnson sought to address this concern during a summit meeting in Honolulu.<sup>29</sup>

Johnson's had other reasons for seeking a meeting with Ky. The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, J. William Fulbright (D-AR), disapproved of the

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<sup>27</sup> Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 74, 83-84.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>29</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 354.

White House's handling of the war. In early 1966, he opened public hearings into the administration's conduct. Johnson hoped in vain that the Honolulu conference would distract the American mass media from the Fulbright hearings.<sup>30</sup> He also wanted to meet Nguyen Van Thieu, in case Ky did not work out. On 3 February 1966, Johnson told Secretary of State Dean Rusk that he wanted to invite Thieu to the meeting in Honolulu because "we'd have a little insurance" in case "something happened to Ky."<sup>31</sup> Johnson's comments were more indicative of a lack of faith in Ky than a high opinion of Thieu. The president admitted after the conference that he knew almost nothing about Ky or Thieu before he met them, so he had no reason to favor one over the other.<sup>32</sup> All Johnson knew for sure was that South Vietnam had a history of political instability, and he did not want to be caught unaware in the event of another coup.

At Honolulu, Saigon's new leaders impressed Johnson. While he had received few positive reports about Ky and Thieu before the conference, he was pleasantly surprised to discover that they were eager to make progress in the war. Ky, in particular, earned Johnson's favor by expressing a shared devotion to political, social, and economic reforms. Johnson understood that Ky—a political novice—might not be able to deliver on his promises, because he would face significant opposition to such policies. The Honolulu conference was nonetheless a good step toward a cordial working relationship. In a joint communiqué issued after the conference, the allies expressed their commitment to

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<sup>30</sup> Gardner, *Pay any Price*, 285.

<sup>31</sup> Telephone Conversation between President Johnson and Secretary of State Rusk, 3 February 1966, *FRUS*, 1966, Vol. IV: Document 63

<sup>32</sup> Telephone Conversation between President Johnson and the Indian Ambassador (Nehru), 10 February 1966, *FRUS*, 1966, Vol. IV: Document 71.

defeating aggression, promoting a social revolution, eliminating suffering, and protecting the principle of self-government. The newly articulated American policy, which Vice President Humphrey called a new Johnson Doctrine, extended the Great Society to Southeast Asia. Ky and Thieu departed in high spirits, basking in the renewed US commitment to Saigon.<sup>33</sup>

Johnson left Honolulu believing that the conference had been a partial success. The spectacle did not protect the White House from Fulbright's hearings, but the president hoped the meeting would strengthen the new government in Saigon and dedicate it to Johnson's favored nation-building programs. Unfortunately, the conference had the opposite effect. Ky and Thieu did not attempt to rally public support or initiate a grand social revolution. The US president was no more successful at encouraging Saigon's leaders to embark on such projects during a 1966 summit in Manila or a 1967 meeting in Guam.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the Honolulu Conference was actually detrimental to South Vietnamese stability. A new threat to the Ky regime appeared, as a result, and his response to it alienated many Americans.

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<sup>33</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 163, 189; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 354-355; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 284-285, 295-296; Telephone Conversation between President Johnson and the Indian Ambassador (Nehru), 10 February 1966, *FRUS*, 1966, Vol. IV: Document 71. Scholars have applied the phrase 'Johnson Doctrine' to both the president's stated goals in Southeast Asia and a policy of protecting countries in the Western Hemisphere against communist aggression. The latter usage is perhaps more common in US foreign relations literature, generally, but some of the most prominent historians of Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War describe the president's statements in Honolulu as an articulation of a "Johnson Doctrine." In this study, the "Johnson Doctrine" refers to Southeast Asia only. In addition to Gardner and Dallek, above, see Heiko Meiertons, *The Doctrines of US Security Policy: An Evaluation Under International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 132-135.

<sup>34</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 383-384; Gardner, *Pay any Price*, 302, 312, 356-359; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 259.

## THE BUDDHIST CRISIS

Under Ngo Dinh Diem's First Republic, many Buddhists protested the government's favoritism of Catholics and its heavy-handed repression of religious protesters. This criticism did not subside after Diem's assassination, as Buddhists continued demanding religious freedom and advocated for a negotiated settlement to end the war. While the participants of the Buddhist Movement held diverse ideologies, militant activists such as Thich Tri Quang became the focus of American ire. These antiwar Buddhists insisted that not all members of the NLF were communists and called for a coalition government that included the insurgents. Consequently, US officials regarded Vietnamese Buddhists as naïve and ignorant.<sup>35</sup>

Buddhist activists grew anxious that Johnson's support for Ky at the 1966 Honolulu conference indicated that the war would continue indefinitely. Afterwards Ky sought to eliminate General Nguyen Chanh Thi, one of his chief rivals, from the Directorate. Thi was the commander of I Corps, where he formed strong relationships with local Buddhists. Ky claimed that Thi had abused his authority, was plotting a coup in Central Vietnam, and supported negotiations with the enemy to end the war. Ky also suspected that Thi was a communist. Tensions between the two ambitious officers had been brewing for some time, however, so there was also a personal element to their rivalry. Thi, who considered Ky and Thieu American puppets, scolded the prime minister for selling out to Washington. Ky threatened to resign if Thi retained his position, so the Directorate voted to dismiss the beleaguered general on March 10. The firing of Thi

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<sup>35</sup> Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), vii-32.

sparked Buddhist protests across the country, and the radical Thich Tri Quang took leadership of this new Struggle Movement.<sup>36</sup>

The US government's reaction to these events was mixed. Lodge originally cautioned Ky not to act rashly against Thi, because the prime minister's personal prestige would suffer considerable damage if he was unable to successfully dismiss a subordinate. After the Directorate's vote, however, the ambassador was pleased to see Thi gone.<sup>37</sup> Back in Washington, Lyndon Johnson asked if "our people wanted [Thi] to leave." McNamara stated flatly that he did. Maxwell Taylor concurred: "He's a bad character and good riddance." General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), called Thi a "conniver," but noted that he had earned the sympathy of some US military personnel, most notably Lieutenant General Lew Walt, commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force.<sup>38</sup> For the most part, the Johnson administration was satisfied with Ky's decision to fire Thi, but this affair soon tested American faith in Saigon.

Shaken by the scale of the Struggle Movement protests, Johnson met with Rusk, McNamara, Rostow, presidential assistant Jack Valenti, and Press Secretary Bill Moyers on April 2. The president explained that the White House would, "Make every effort to keep Ky. But be ready to make [a] terrible choice. Perhaps take a stand in Thailand—or take someone else other than Ky."<sup>39</sup> That same day, Lodge authorized Ky to use US

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<sup>36</sup> Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 33-38; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 358-359; Gardner, *Pay any Price*, 299.

<sup>37</sup> Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Notes of Meeting, 11 March 1966, *FRUS*, 1966, Vol. IV: Document 93.

<sup>39</sup> Notes of Meeting, 2 April 1966, *FRUS*, 1966, Vol. IV: Document 109.

transport planes to help defeat the rebels. Johnson did not overrule his ambassador, but sent orders to keep US forces out of South Vietnamese riots.<sup>40</sup>

Ky intended to put his new resources to good use. On April 3, he announced that he was deploying troops to Danang in order to restore government control of that city. Seeking to justify this action, Ky denigrated the protesters as communists, and threatened to shoot the mayor of Danang for supporting the insurrection. Two days later, Ky arrived in Danang with four divisions from ARVN. He did not bring enough soldiers to confront the collection of dissidents and ARVN deserters, however, and was forced to accept a political compromise. After some vacillation on the details of the settlement, the Directorate agreed on April 14 to meet Buddhist demands for democratization by hosting elections for a new constituent assembly.<sup>41</sup>

President Johnson disliked the proposal for an assembly, saying he would “rather have someone we can control rather than a communist takeover at the Assembly.” Johnson’s highest priority was stability, and Ky had not proven competent to break the cycle of South Vietnamese instability. “The way I see it, Ky is gone, the last gasp. Doubt he can pull it off. When he goes, there’ll be hell in this country. Let’s get a government we can appoint and support. We need a tough advisor.” If the South Vietnamese were not capable of governing themselves, Johnson thought, the White House would do so for them. Taylor argued that, “We can minimize our losses if Ky goes and the Directory stays. We have to take sides this time.” Johnson did not respond. He was still shocked that Ky had threatened to shoot the mayor of Danang. Incredibly, Johnson asked his

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 361.

<sup>41</sup> Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 43, 53-55.



advisers if Ky had made any other mistakes since taking office. Taylor replied: “The Hitler statement—but I thought he had matured.”<sup>42</sup>

The Buddhist Crisis triggered a new debate in the White House about the Vietnam War. While Johnson worried about the dangers of a constituent assembly, the State Department believed such a body would be crucial to garnering international and domestic support for the US intervention. When Ky announced on May 6 that he would retain power until elections could be held in 1967, therefore, Rusk was incensed. The secretary of state recommended that Johnson threaten to leave Vietnam if Ky did not hand over power to an assembly much earlier. Johnson disliked that idea, and told the National Security Council (NSC) that, “we are committed and we will not be deterred.”<sup>43</sup>

Although Johnson vetoed Rusk’s recommendation, historian Robert Topmiller argues that the White House genuinely considered abandoning Saigon in light of this most recent turmoil. In the end, Johnson decided to stay the course, primarily because he was still a committed Cold Warrior who was not prepared to abandon Vietnam for his Great Society. The “loss” of China to communism had caused considerable domestic turmoil in the United States during the 1950s, and Johnson did not want a similar disturbance to hamstring his legislative agenda. While the White House acted primarily to promote geostrategic and domestic political interests, Johnson, Rostow, and Taylor were also motivated by their intense hatred of the Vietnamese Buddhists. In particularly dramatic terms, Taylor suggested that a “whiff of grapeshot” could help stabilize the Ky

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<sup>42</sup> Notes of Meeting, 4 April 1966, *FRUS*, 1966, Vol. IV: Document 112.

<sup>43</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 363.

regime. Johnson appears to have appreciated Taylor's instinct to employ violence, since he asked Rostow if US officials were following that advice.<sup>44</sup>

As General William Westmoreland, the top US commander in Vietnam, crafted plans to help Saigon defeat the Struggle Movement, Ky began his own crackdown. On May 15, without first notifying American officials, he launched another attack on Danang. Before Westmoreland could bring US resources to bear, the dissidents collapsed beneath Ky's assault. There were a few scattered protests after the attack on Danang, but Ky shut them down with the same brutal efficiency. Johnson defended Ky's heavy handedness on May 21, arguing that communist aggression justified Saigon's violent reaction to the protests. South Vietnam eventually produced a constituent assembly and constitution, as promised, but there was no doubt that the military ruled South Vietnam.<sup>45</sup>

By serving as prime minister for more than a year, Nguyen Cao Ky had proven more successful than any of his predecessors since Ngo Dinh Diem. The Buddhist Crisis demonstrated, however, that Ky's control of the country was tenuous at best. In light of this turbulence, Johnson decided to prioritize stability over democratization. The Vietnamese, the White House decided, were not sophisticated enough for democracy. If Ky was to remain in power much longer, he needed to maintain unity in the armed forces. In this, he both succeeded and failed. While senior officers sustained their support for Independence Palace, the young prime minister lost his title and power. After the election of 1967, South Vietnam entered an era of comparative stability under a new president.

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<sup>44</sup> Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 96-111.

<sup>45</sup> Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 78-79, 84-85, 126-136; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 363; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 300.

## THE PRESIDENCY OF NGUYEN VAN THIEU

Saigon had one more opportunity to create a legitimate, popular government that would meet Johnson's standards. Instead of marking meaningful progress, however, the 1967 South Vietnamese presidential election devolved into a farce. Faced with potential instability and the collapse of military unity in Saigon, the White House sacrificed its democratic ideals in exchange for order. Political scientist James McAllister correctly notes that historians have largely neglected the 1967 election, despite the immense investments of time and brainpower US officials devoted to the matter.<sup>46</sup> The election marked a turning point in the war, as a new president emerged in Saigon.

In January 1967, US presidential adviser Robert Komer suggested that neither Ky nor Thieu should participate in the upcoming contest. "Even if they could win legitimately, which most experts doubt, few in VN [Vietnam] or elsewhere would believe that it was not a rigged affair."<sup>47</sup> As McAllister explains, however, US policy regarding the election was formulated in Embassy Saigon, rather than Washington. Ambassador

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<sup>46</sup> James McAllister, "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions": The Johnson Administration and the South Vietnamese Elections of 1967," *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no. 4 (November 2004): 619-652, p. 619-621. A few scholars have given the 1967 election greater treatment than is usual. Ellsworth Bunker's biographer devoted a few pages to the contest, though this treatment seems designed to prove that the ambassador acted ethically throughout the affair. See Schaffer, *Ellsworth Bunker*, 182-183. Frances Fitzgerald devoted a brief chapter to the Assembly and presidential elections in *Fire in the Lake*. Although Fitzgerald did not have access to cable traffic between Saigon and Washington or internal US memoranda at the time of publication, her study warrants consideration, as she writes passionately about the dramatic conflict between Thieu and Ky. See Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 323-338. For a rosy portrayal of the election, see Howard R. Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam* (Washington and Stanford: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research and Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, 1972), 49-89.

<sup>47</sup> McAllister, "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions," 619-620.

Lodge and his replacement, Ellsworth Bunker, strongly supported a policy of non-intervention in the election, arguing that stability and military unity should take priority over a fair contest. Several officials in the State Department and White House rejected this position, claiming that the election was too important to leave to Saigon's military. These officials wanted to take responsibility for guaranteeing a free and fair election. Johnson, favoring a policy that facilitated stability, chose not to engage this particular debate, and let the embassy have the last word.<sup>48</sup>

The State Department was more opposed to a Thieu ticket than a Ky campaign. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Leonard Unger and Vietnam Working Group Director Robert Miller argued that a Thieu presidency “would be considered a victory for the status quo, for continued military domination of the government and for conservatism (sic) in the political, economic, and social fields.” According to these officials, Thieu “inspires too much distrust to gain [a] key elected leadership position in [an] honest campaign.”<sup>49</sup> South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem later confirmed this impression, claiming that the chief of state was a perpetual schemer.<sup>50</sup>

Maxwell Taylor, now working as a presidential consultant, indicated in late January that Americans did not think much more of Ky than Thieu. Among embassy

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<sup>48</sup> McAllister, “A Fiasco of Noble Proportions,” 621-623; George Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 230-231; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 263.

<sup>49</sup> McAllister, “A Fiasco of Noble Proportions,” 624-625.

<sup>50</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 197-198. Ky did his best to promote these observations. On 10 January 1967, he told pacification expert Edward Lansdale that Thieu's reputation for cleverness made him unelectable. See Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 10 January 1967, *FRUS*, 1967, Vol. V: Document 12.

staff, “Thieu is regarded as the more desirable in terms of experience and stability but he is not generally popular and suffers politically from being a Catholic and an alleged Dai Viet.”<sup>51</sup> Historian Seth Jacobs argues that Ngo Dinh Diem’s Catholicism was crucial to the American decision to support him.<sup>52</sup> After Diem’s struggles with the Buddhist Movement, and Saigon’s subsequent troubles with this group, Washington learned a valuable lesson. A Catholic president could destabilize South Vietnam, and Thieu lacked the ability to counteract the problems created by his religion. Presidential adviser Clark Clifford reported in August that Thieu would probably be a better administrator, but he lacked key political skills. “Ky is shrewd,” Clifford said. “Thieu is possibly more discreet and more profound. Thieu doesn't have the flair for drama and exercises more caution. Thieu may be somewhat less popular, as a result.”<sup>53</sup>

State Department officials were more generous with Ky, but they still considered him a weak candidate. He was a Northerner in a country divided by regionalism, and a military officer in a culture that, according to Daniel Ellsberg, “accords little respect to the role.” Ky’s violent suppression of the Struggle Movement demonstrated his aversion to democracy, Ellsberg continued. “In fact, it is a challenging exercise to imagine just how one would change or add to this set of properties to invent a less acceptable, more alien figure for the role of popular, representative, symbolic, inspiring national leader in

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<sup>51</sup> Letter from the President’s Consultant (Taylor) to President Johnson, 30 January 1967, *FRUS*, 1967, Vol. V: Document 30. The Dai Viet was a secret society of militant Vietnamese nationalists. See Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 16-17, 23-34.

<sup>52</sup> Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam*.

<sup>53</sup> Notes of Meeting, 5 August 1967, *FRUS*, 1967, Vol. V: Document 270.

South Vietnam.”<sup>54</sup> Given the weaknesses of both candidates, the State Department preferred to either sacrifice government efficacy in favor of a more representative administration or to encourage Ky or Thieu to serve a civilian leader as vice president or prime minister.<sup>55</sup>

Embassy Saigon, however, doubted that the elections would fundamentally change the power dynamics of South Vietnam. Ambassador Lodge had grown to appreciate Ky and Thieu, and believed military unity and stability should take priority over a fair election. Besides, Lodge saw no worthy civilian presidential candidates. When Johnson asked the ambassador about potential civilian leadership, Lodge said that, “the course of recent Vietnamese history has produced a breed of politicians trained in the techniques of plot and conspiracy but ill-suited by background or experience to provide positive political leadership.” Once again, Lodge denigrated the Vietnamese as politically primitive. He further argued that the two civilians seeking the presidency, Tran Van Huong and Phan Khac Suu, were “survivors from the days of conspiracies against the French and against Diem... but neither Suu nor Huong would be likely to run the government with anything like the efficiency of Thieu or Ky.”<sup>56</sup>

While they were divided over the desirability of a military presidential ticket, all Johnson administration officials agreed that a joint Ky-Thieu ticket would prove an

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in McAllister, “A Fiasco of Noble Proportions,” 626. Daniel Ellsberg was a personal assistant for the deputy ambassador to Vietnam, William Porter. The CIA originally believed the successful termination of General Thi provided Ky and Thieu with greater prestige, although this observation preceded Ky’s assault on Danang. See National Intelligence Estimate, 15 December 1966, *FRUS*, 1966, Vol. IV: Document 343

<sup>55</sup> McAllister, “A Fiasco of Noble Proportions,” 627.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 628-632. For the whole conversation, see Memorandum for the Record, 21 March 1967, *FRUS*, 1967, Vol. V: Document 116.

unmitigated disaster. Komer and Rostow claimed such a ticket would turn the contest into a farce, and the State Department was firmly committed to improving civilian representation in Saigon. Rostow suggested that Westmoreland and Lodge should encourage Thieu to withdraw from the race and take command of ARVN and military modernization. Lodge had no clear preference between Ky and Thieu, however, and opposed such intervention. Thieu insisted on running, resisting both heavy-handed efforts by Ky's supporters and gentle nudging from Westmoreland and the newly appointed Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to do so.<sup>57</sup>

By May, US officials had received numerous reports that Ky's supporters were working to rig the election. General Nguyen Ngoc Loan—who notoriously executed a man accused of serving in the NLF during the Tet Offensive—monitored, bribed, and blackmailed candidates for the new National Assembly in order to garner support for Ky. Bunker advocated taking an even stronger stand against a Thieu campaign, hoping that Ky would act more ethically if his foremost competition was eliminated. Specifically, the ambassador recommended offering Ky covert financial assistance and advice in exchange for firing Loan. Bunker's proposal, described by a staffer on Johnson's NSC as a "power play against Thieu," met strong opposition in Washington. While few Americans held Thieu in high regard, nobody believed Ky would accept such a deal or keep it secret.<sup>58</sup>

Despite American preferences, Thieu eventually forced Ky to abandon his presidential ambitions. In late June, the Directorate met for three days to discuss the

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<sup>57</sup> McAllister, "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions," 634-637. Bunker replaced Lodge on 5 April 1967 as US ambassador to South Vietnam.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 640-641. Ky also started his campaign early, in violation of "the spirit, if not the letter, of the law," as Penniman puts it. See Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 55.

competing military tickets. In the end, Ky agreed to join Thieu's ticket as the vice presidential candidate. Ky claimed that he stepped aside in order to preserve military unity after Thieu threatened the country with a divided ticket. The prime minister also argued that Thieu had agreed to serve as a symbolic leader, and to grant Ky authority over Cabinet appointments and the military. In theory, a shadow military committee chaired by Ky would enforce this division of power. Thieu eventually dissolved this committee, though, and concentrated power in his own office. While US officials once considered a joint ticket the worst of all predicted outcomes, Bunker was glad to hear that the South Vietnamese military was united under one banner.<sup>59</sup>

After the military ticket was finally settled, McAllister argues, Bunker returned to Embassy Saigon's old policy of non-intervention. The ambassador may indeed have largely conformed to such an approach, but in August he tried to secure covert funding for Thieu and Ky, as well the leading opposition candidate, Tran Van Huong. Bunker argued that these bribes would give the embassy leverage over both the winners and runners-up in the election. The government in Saigon would therefore remain receptive to American advice, and Bunker could encourage the opposition to cooperate with the new administration. The CIA rejected this request, claiming that Ky already had enough money to campaign. The Agency explained that it did not want a relationship based on

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<sup>59</sup> McAllister, "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions," 641; Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 204-205; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 451.



bribery with Ky. The CIA also doubted that financial transactions with Huong could be kept secret, or that the opposition candidate even desired such assistance.<sup>60</sup>

For the most part, Bunker did not interfere with the election, which gave Thieu and Ky the freedom to eliminate their competition without American interference. Au Truong Thanh, Ky's former minister of finance, had resigned in October 1966 as an advocate for neutralism. As punishment, Thieu and Ky barred him from the presidential contest. Duong Van "Big" Minh, Saigon's first leader after the 1963 coup, met a similar obstacle. A popular figure that could potentially rally both military and civilian support, the government had exiled Minh to Thailand in late 1964, when Phan Khac Suu replaced him as chief of state. Thieu and Ky banned Big Minh from returning to South Vietnam, claiming he represented a national security threat. The State Department ordered Bunker to describe for Thieu and Ky the possible political consequences of prohibiting Minh from competing for the presidency. Bunker did not want Minh to run, either, though. Despite his instructions, the ambassador only told Thieu and Ky to find a legal excuse for their judgment against Minh.<sup>61</sup>

Reports of further electioneering soon followed. All of the presidential candidates, most of whom travelled together, were supposed to attend a rally in Quang Tri on August 6. Most of the candidates were flying to the rally when the plane suddenly diverted to Dong Ha. Conveniently, nobody from the Thieu-Ky campaign was aboard. Thieu and Ky

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<sup>60</sup> Telegram From the Station in Saigon to the Central Intelligence Agency, 16 August 1967, *FRUS*, 1967, Vol. V: Document 282; Telegram From the Central Intelligence Agency to the Station in Saigon, 19 August 1967, *FRUS*, 1967, Vol. V: Document 289.

<sup>61</sup> McAllister, "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions," 642-643; Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (London: Presidio Press, 1978), 135.

claimed they were innocent in the affair. Bunker accepted these protests, but the other candidates were skeptical. To this day, there is no clear proof that Thieu and Ky arranged for the plane to fly off-track, but they certainly had a record of unseemly conduct.<sup>62</sup>

Several members of the US Congress expressed disgust over the reported electioneering. Fifty-seven members of the House of Representatives condemned Ky on August 10 for rigging the elections. Senators Jacob Javits, John Pastore, and Robert Kennedy also rebuked Saigon, arguing that such fraud was the natural consequence of America's misbegotten adventure in Vietnam. The American media generally treated the election favorably, though, and suggested that most Vietnamese voters were able to vote freely. Thieu and Ky took office with a plurality; they received less than thirty-five percent of the vote. In fact, the vote was so low that Thieu believed the United States had rigged it so he would be more receptive to American advice. The runner-up, Truong Dinh Dzu, led a campaign to void the results because of the fraud. American officials largely dismissed these complaints, but the National Assembly nearly nullified the election as a result. Dzu then learned the price of dissent; the government imprisoned him and several other candidates.<sup>63</sup>

Despite American preferences, Nguyen Van Thieu soared into the presidency of South Vietnam. Johnson had not been comfortable with any of the previous regimes that took power after Ngo Dinh Diem's death, and Thieu did not have an auspicious start at changing American minds about South Vietnamese factionalism and skullduggery. Had

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<sup>62</sup> McAllister, "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions," 645.

<sup>63</sup> McAllister, "A Fiasco of Noble Proportions," 647-650; Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 337; Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 82-83.

he maintained the stability of his country and initiated a broad nation-building program, he might have earned Johnson's belated respect. He achieved neither goal before the 1968 US presidential election, however. Under Thieu, South Vietnam nearly collapsed before an enemy assault and his alliance with the White House chilled considerably over peace negotiations. In the end, it was Johnson—not Thieu—who succumbed to these pressures.

### **TET OFFENSIVE**

Thieu was not long in his new office before he faced a major military threat. In early 1968, North Vietnamese forces attacked the US marine base at Khe Sanh, near the demilitarized zone. While Washington focused on the siege, North Vietnamese and NLF units launched a major attack on January 30. Over the course of the Tet Offensive, the enemy assaulted thirty-six provincial capitals, five major cities, sixty-four provincial capitals, and fifty hamlets. The NLF even struck the US embassy and Independence Palace, and took temporary control of a fortress in the old imperial capital of Hue.<sup>64</sup>

Washington and Saigon recovered, and the Tet Offensive is now widely considered a military failure for the Vietnamese revolutionaries. The enemy, however, struck political and psychological blows against the United States, as it became clear that the war had stalemated. The Johnson administration's publicly expressed optimism about the war rang hollow after the Tet Offensive, discrediting him as a reliable American leader.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 152-153. For a brief overview of the battles of the Tet Offensive, see James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3-78.

<sup>65</sup> Ronnie E. Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London: Frank Cass, 1995); David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), xiii-xvii, 110-112; Herring, *America's*

In light of the Tet Offensive, the White House began to question its strategy in Vietnam. The US military, particularly General Wheeler, pressured the president to escalate the American combat role in Vietnam, and forced Westmoreland to submit a request for additional troops. McNamara resigned as secretary of defense on March 1, but he opposed investing more soldiers at the beginning of the Offensive. His replacement, Clark Clifford, was of a similar mind. The Tet Offensive even convinced the president's hawkish foreign policy advisers—the so-called Wise Men—that the United States could not defeat its enemies militarily. Johnson's final decision satisfied none of his advisers. When Wheeler and Westmoreland submitted a contingency plan that called for an additional 206,000 soldiers, Johnson authorized only 13,500 reinforcements. In addition, the president announced on March 31 that he would neither seek nor accept the Democratic presidential nomination for the upcoming US election. To facilitate peace negotiations with Hanoi, Johnson also offered to initiate a partial bombing halt.<sup>66</sup>

Thieu's performance during the Tet Offensive did little to solidify American support for him. While US forces were alert when the enemy struck, half of Thieu's troops were furloughed for the Tet holiday. Thieu had wanted a forty-eight-hour truce for

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*Longest War*, 229-234; Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 238-239; Robert J. McMahon, "Turning Point: The Vietnam War's Pivotal Year, November 1967-November 1968," in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 191-216. As James Willbanks notes, the strategic political and psychological victory that Hanoi achieved may have been an unintended, but welcomed, consequence of the Offensive. See Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 79-85.

<sup>66</sup> Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 152-163; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 459. Johnson's decision was also motivated by a challenge to his incumbency by Democrats Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. See, for example, Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1989), 186-187.

the celebration, and had only consented to reducing the duration to thirty-six hours under American pressure.<sup>67</sup> Thieu's decision therefore put both South Vietnamese and American soldiers at risk.

On February 1, Westmoreland advised Wheeler that the Tet Offensive offered Thieu an opportunity to exert "real leadership."<sup>68</sup> Some US officials were not content to wait for that to happen. The CIA claimed that Saigon had failed to mobilize its people or provide dynamic government and military leadership. The Agency wanted Thieu to appoint Ky his chief of staff and director of operations, and to place him in charge of reviewing all South Vietnamese personnel files, with the goal of improving leadership. The CIA also advocated for the creation of a South Vietnamese War and Reconstruction Council to organize and review the performance of Saigon's resistance to the invasion. If Thieu refused to follow such a scheme or failed to make progress, the Agency concluded that Washington should seek new South Vietnamese leadership, halt the bombing and negotiate with Hanoi, or discuss the creation of a coalition government with the NLF. Rusk adamantly refused to issue this kind of threat, claiming that this was not how Americans should treat their allies.<sup>69</sup>

Embassy Saigon did, however, encourage Thieu to mobilize the general population to tackle some of the most important problems he faced. Bunker's list of immediate concerns included opening roads, sustaining economic activity in an active

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<sup>67</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 544; Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 132-133.

<sup>68</sup> Telegram From the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Westmoreland) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler), 1 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 43.

<sup>69</sup> Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, 2 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 44; Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 182.

war zone, improving ARVN leadership, and enhancing Saigon's intelligence systems. The ambassador also raised longer-term issues such as corruption, which damaged the government's reputation with the South Vietnamese polity. Reflecting Johnson's opinion, Bunker encouraged Thieu to break from his normal pattern of caution by exerting proactive leadership on these challenges.<sup>70</sup>

Washington feared that Thieu's usual reluctance to take decisive action posed a major threat to South Vietnamese security.<sup>71</sup> Thieu's decision to request additional US soldiers to face the Offensive, rather than raise additional South Vietnamese forces, also disturbed the White House. Rusk, a hawkish Cold Warrior, objected to Thieu's request in a February 12 meeting, even as Westmoreland called for additional reinforcements. Clark Clifford later repeated Rusk's disgust. The secretary of state, however, still favored sending six battalions if it would help Thieu repel his enemies. According to McNamara, Thieu needed those troops just to avoid a rout at Khe Sanh.<sup>72</sup>

Thieu did commission a Central Recovery Committee, but his vice president took credit for its strong performance. This new body was responsible for interring corpses,

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<sup>70</sup> Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive*, 102; Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 2 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 45.

<sup>71</sup> Memorandum From William J. Jorden of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow), 3 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 49; Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive*, 100-101. Thieu was not pleased with the US government, either. He reportedly believed rumors that the White House knew about the Tet Offensive beforehand, and allowed it to happen in order to encourage the development of a coalition government in the South. According to these rumors, Johnson hoped this new regime would facilitate US troop withdrawals and continue to accept American advice. See Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 180.

<sup>72</sup> Notes of Meeting, 12 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 70; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 440.

assisting the wounded, feeding refugees, and rebuilding destroyed infrastructure. As head of the Recovery Committee Ky so impressed the CIA that the Agency declared him the “man of the hour.” Unfortunately, Ky’s achievements were highlighted in the press, and rumors swirled that he was planning a coup. To prevent his rival from gaining too much prestige, Thieu forced Ky to resign from the Committee. The vice president’s work was nonetheless appreciated by the US embassy, which noted progress in all of the committee’s areas of responsibility.<sup>73</sup>

At the end of February, before Ky resigned from the Recovery Committee, Thieu began to earn greater American goodwill by taking a more active role in the recovery effort. Bunker reported that Thieu had chaired two meetings, and intended to do so twice a week in the future.<sup>74</sup> As more time passed, Thieu earned greater respect from the ambassador. On March 14, Bunker informed Washington that, “President Thieu is continuing to take an increasingly active and decisive role in the government, providing more effective and more visible leadership than at any time in the past.” Bunker acknowledged that Thieu was neither a charismatic nor dynamic leader, but the

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<sup>73</sup> Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 181-182; Vietnam Situation Report, 12 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 72; Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 22 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 82; Memorandum From the Ambassador's Special Assistant (Lansdale) to the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker), 27 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 88.

<sup>74</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 29 February 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 94.

ambassador insisted that his performance was improving, as Saigon restored order and ARVN returned to patrolling the countryside.<sup>75</sup>

Robert Komer, the director of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), disagreed that great progress had been made. Komer met with Bunker and Thieu on March 18 to discuss the South Vietnamese government's flaws. He knew about the White House's concerns about the South Vietnamese response to the Tet Offensive. Bunker urged Thieu to pay attention while Komer described a litany of problems with Saigon. Komer explained that many officials in Washington had been shocked by the slow reaction of South Vietnamese civil and military institutions to the Tet Offensive. He also warned that the Thieu-Ky rivalry projected an image of disunity, complained that ARVN was insufficiently aggressive in the countryside, and lamented that a campaign against corruption had floundered.<sup>76</sup>

When Komer said that South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Van Loc was also a weak leader, Thieu seized that issue. He asked "candidly," in Bunker's words, if the White House wanted Thieu to fire Loc. Komer and Bunker believed that Loc was intelligent, but a poor decision-maker. When Thieu or Ky chaired Recovery Committee meetings, major decisions were implemented. Komer described the committee as a "debating society" when Loc was in control. The pacification director thus recommended

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<sup>75</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 14 March 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 124.

<sup>76</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 18 March 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 138.



giving Loc time—he suggested two months—to perform, “on pain of dismissal.” Thieu smiled, but did not immediately respond.<sup>77</sup>

Over the next few months, Thieu further improved his standing with the United States. On March 21, he announced that he would raise another 135,000 soldiers in order to take a larger share of the war burden.<sup>78</sup> Johnson later wrote that, “Thieu’s statement never received the attention it deserved in the American press or elsewhere.” While there had been some challenges, moreover, the US president noted with satisfaction that Hanoi and the NLF had not overthrown the Thieu regime.<sup>79</sup> In addition, Thieu managed in May to secure the approval of the National Assembly for a draft of all men aged eighteen to thirty-eight, and orders for men aged seventeen or thirty-nine to forty-three to serve in village defense programs.<sup>80</sup>

Bunker was partially responsible for Thieu’s improving reputation in the White House. In a cable on May 2, the ambassador argued that Thieu had become a more confident leader, who had successfully mobilized the South Vietnamese against the enemy. Bunker blamed Thieu’s subordinates for Saigon’s slow reaction to the Offensive and the lethargic pace of social reform. He wrote that Thieu had good ideas, but his subordinates did not implement them.<sup>81</sup>

Bunker was thus pleased when Thieu replaced Prime Minister Loc with Tran Van Huong, who appeared to have greater popular support and more determination to lead his

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Oberdorfer, *Tet!* 305.

<sup>79</sup> Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 413-414.

<sup>80</sup> Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 406.

<sup>81</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 2 May 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 218.

people. Huong was a former ally of Thieu's in the Armed Forces Council, and had previously served as prime minister under Nguyen Khanh. By promoting Huong, Bunker thought, Thieu could better govern Saigon's throng of ineffective bureaucrats. Thieu's authority was further enhanced when several prominent Ky supporters were accidentally killed in a May 1968 air attack. Altogether, Bunker believed that Thieu emerged from the Tet Offensive a stronger and more capable leader. While the Thieu-Ky rivalry and the scheming of South Vietnamese generals continued to pose a challenge for Independence Palace, there was no threat of a coup in the immediate future.<sup>82</sup>

After the Tet Offensive, the Johnson administration remained divided over the virtues of the government in Saigon. While he had failed to quickly mobilize his people to resist the enemy attack, Thieu had seemingly demonstrated a capacity to grow as a national leader. Bunker was particularly impressed with Thieu, and later took that optimism into the Nixon administration. If some US officials doubted that Thieu was better than any of his predecessors, though, they could perhaps draw satisfaction from the fact that Thieu was uneasy as well. At first baffled by Johnson's resignation, Thieu wondered if the American president's decision was final. Bunker explained that Johnson was trying to free himself from domestic pressures by refusing to run for a second term, but the ambassador knew that Thieu still feared the consequences of the US president's

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<sup>82</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 23 May 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 245; Special National Intelligence Estimate, 6 June 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Document 245; John Prados, "The Shape of the Table: Nguyen Van Thieu and Negotiations to End the Conflict," in *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964-1968*, edited by Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger, 355-370 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 357-358; Allen, *None So Blind*, 263-264.

resignation. Ambassador Bui Diem had sent disturbing reports from Washington about a new eagerness to reach a negotiated peace agreement.<sup>83</sup> For the first time, Diem heard Americans speak of “an honorable peace” instead of a military victory.<sup>84</sup> Thieu was not ready for negotiations, though, and he appeared willing to sacrifice his alliance with Johnson in order to preserve South Vietnamese independence.

### UNATTAINABLE PEACE

The Johnson-Thieu alliance finally broke down in late 1968 over the US president’s peace initiative. The Tet Offensive and Saigon’s sordid history of instability convinced the American president that the South Vietnamese were not capable of defeating their enemies militarily. The best option, Johnson believed, was to pursue a peace treaty in earnest. American and international officials pursued a variety of peace initiatives before the 1968 talks.<sup>85</sup> As Johnson’s last months in office passed, he exerted greater effort to secure a peace treaty. Saigon officials, however, were not ready to cooperate. They believed that the negotiations procedures established by Hanoi and Washington put the Republic of Vietnam at a disadvantage. Thieu’s obstruction of the 1968 negotiations infuriated the White House, which concluded that Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon had conspired with Saigon to sustain the war. While there is little evidence that this plot, known as the Anna Chennault Affair, drove Thieu’s decisions, it is clear that the scheme influenced American foreign policy in the years that

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<sup>83</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 460; Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 224-225

<sup>84</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 224-225.

<sup>85</sup> For overviews of these earlier initiatives, see Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger, eds., *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964-1968* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).

followed. The Johnson administration had never truly liked any of the governments that took power in Saigon after 1964, but Nguyen Van Thieu enjoyed a promising ally in the White House by 1969.

In his March 31 speech, Johnson offered Hanoi a bombing halt north of the 20<sup>th</sup> parallel in exchange for substantive negotiations. He extended that sphere of protection to the 19<sup>th</sup> parallel after the public interpreted an April 1 raid just south of the 20<sup>th</sup> as a revocation of his dramatic announcement. On April 3, Hanoi announced its agreement to dispatch a delegation to discuss the details of a halt-for-talks deal. This was not, strictly speaking, an agreement to negotiate an end to the war, as the North Vietnamese agreed only to discuss terms for a bombing halt. Hanoi's announcement triggered a passionate debate in the White House. Rusk, Rostow, Taylor, Bunker, and the US military all argued that Johnson's speech included as many concessions as Washington could accept for the moment, and wanted to avoid looking too eager to settle the war. Clark Clifford, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Warnke, Averell Harriman, and Cyrus Vance argued in favor of facilitating talks. In the end, Johnson accepted Hanoi's proposal, appointed Harriman and Vance his representatives, and recommended Geneva as a venue for the talks.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Herbert Y. Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," in *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964-1968*, edited by Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 321-354, p. 321-324. One adviser may have been an outlier. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson proposed on March 14 that Johnson reduce aid to Saigon in the hopes that the South Vietnamese government would at least survive for a brief period. He did not use the term "decent

Already suspicious of the White House, Thieu created a secret war cabinet that quietly rejected any peace deal that would establish a coalition government. Two months later, on June 4, Thieu told Ambassador Kenneth Young that, “many Vietnamese are afraid of an American abandonment of Vietnam or a sell-out in Paris.” Thieu asked why Johnson had not established a deadline for Hanoi to cease all infiltration through the demilitarized zone. He then declared his determination not to form a coalition government.<sup>87</sup> He would not abandon the war only to lose South Vietnam’s independence with a peace treaty.

The Johnson administration had been toying with various schemes to bring the NLF into the Saigon government since 1967, in order to facilitate a peace deal. During the Guam Summit, the White House had proposed allowing the NLF to join the Republic as a political party. This was a significant change in American policy, because past rumors that Saigon was negotiating with its enemies had always inspired condemnation from anticommunists. Indeed, the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem had taken place amid rumors that he was secretly negotiating with the NLF and Hanoi for a political settlement. In Guam, Thieu and Ky convinced Johnson that they were open to a potential NLF party. In April 1968, however, Bunker reported that Thieu could not even consider bringing the NLF into the existing government as a political party, because he believed the insurgents would quickly usurp power. Hanoi, Thieu claimed, felt confident about negotiations

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interval,” but this concept was later considered by the Nixon administration. See Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 445-446.

<sup>87</sup> Prados, “The Shape of the Table,” 359.

because of conditions in the United States, where the antiwar movement was damaging Johnson's credibility.<sup>88</sup>

The White House nonetheless continued to pursue a peace settlement. After some haggling over the location of the talks—Hanoi rejected Geneva, initiating a round of discussion regarding the appropriateness of fifteen cities and an Indonesian warship as venues—Harriman and Vance met Johnson on May 8 to discuss their instructions. The president gave them four priorities for the negotiations. First, they were to secure substantive negotiations for a bombing halt and peace settlement. Second, they were to discuss how a ceasefire or lasting peace would be monitored. Third, they were to treat the demilitarized zone as an international boundary, rather than a provisional line between two parties to a civil war. This provision protected South Vietnamese sovereignty, so Hanoi could not claim a right to rule in the South. Finally, Johnson demanded Saigon's inclusion in any conversations about the future of South Vietnam.<sup>89</sup>

Despite early signs of progress, the dialogue between Washington and Hanoi bogged down.<sup>90</sup> American intelligence reports indicated that Hanoi was planning a new offensive. Johnson was determined not to let the North Vietnamese take South Vietnam, but Clifford bristled at the lack of progress toward peace. On May 1, he complained that the war was still unwinnable. Hanoi may have been planning a new attack, but the United

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<sup>88</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 356-357, 465; McMahon, "Turning Point," 209-210; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 119-126; Memorandum for the Record, 20 March 1967, *FRUS*, 1967, Vol. V: Document 115

<sup>89</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 325-326

<sup>90</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 330-333; Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 550-551.

States could no longer afford to support a war in Southeast Asia. “They’ve been put on notice that all of them, all the Asians that have been depending on Uncle Sam to fight for them, have got to get off their big fat Asian ass and defend themselves.” Meanwhile, American hawks, most notably Secretary Rusk, continued to insist that Hanoi was losing militarily, and that the White House should hold firm until Hanoi approached the peace table with a properly contrite attitude. When Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin suggested Hanoi might agree to serious negotiations before—rather than after—Johnson ordered a bombing halt, Rusk and Rostow lobbied against any response that might make the White House appear too eager to end the war. They argued that Johnson should act aloof by asking Hanoi to provide more details about this offer, instead of accepting it right away.<sup>91</sup>

In July, Clifford visited Saigon to assess the status of the war. In his first meeting with Thieu, Ky, and Bunker, Clifford decided that the South Vietnamese did not really want the war to end. Clifford told Johnson that the war had created a “golden flow of money” for Thieu and Ky, and neither man was eager to sacrifice this treasure. During Clifford’s second meeting with Thieu and Ky, he stated flatly that American support for South Vietnam would collapse without meaningful progress in the war. Bunker was astonished by the secretary’s tone, but Clifford believed the ambassador had been insufficiently firm with Thieu.<sup>92</sup>

The talks remained stalled through August, when Hanoi launched another offensive. While captured documents indicated that this campaign was designed to last

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<sup>91</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 467-475.

<sup>92</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 330-333; Clifford with Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President*, 550-551.

longer than the Tet Offensive, US and South Vietnamese forces soundly defeated it. In mid-September, Harriman and Vance told the president that the North Vietnamese were ready to begin substantive negotiations as soon as American bombs stopped landing on their country. After the mini offensive, however, Johnson wanted some sort of public demonstration of goodwill from Hanoi before he ordered a bombing halt. Harriman returned to Washington on September 17, and expressed his belief in Hanoi's sincerity. He doubted he could get a public statement on the matter, however, because the communists wanted to portray the bombing cessation as "unconditional." Vance reaffirmed that position two weeks later, and the negotiations accelerated thereafter. Bunker and General Creighton Abrams claimed they could support a bombing halt if Hanoi promised not to violate the demilitarized zone, attack South Vietnamese cities, or obstruct Saigon's participation in the talks. The ambassador consulted Thieu, who seemed to accept the proposal so long as US forces maintained their offensives in Laos and South Vietnam, and resumed the bombing if Hanoi acted in bad faith.<sup>93</sup>

The Johnson administration briefly united around a scheme to halt the bombings in exchange for peace talks. Rusk and Rostow, however, soon hardened their positions. They convinced Johnson to demand that the talks begin within twenty-four hours of the last bomb landing in the North. Rostow believed Hanoi's proposal indicated that the North Vietnamese felt weaker after the Tet Offensive, and had only reluctantly agreed to

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<sup>93</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 335-336; Prados, "The Shape of the Table," 359; Embassy Telegram [Hereafter, Embtel] 40220 [all Embtels are from Saigon unless otherwise stated], 14 October 1968, Box 3, "Materials used at first meeting concerning possible bombing cessation, 10/8-13/68, National Security Files [Hereafter, NSF], Files of Walt W. Rostow [Hereafter, FWWR], Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum [Hereafter, LBJLM]; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 481



negotiate. On October 15, however, Bunker reported that Thieu wished to delay offering the halt-for-talks deal so he could confer with his advisers. As Bui Diem noted, the White House had insisted on democratic reforms for South Vietnam, and could no longer expect the efficiencies of a dictatorship. Rusk expressed frustration with Thieu's intransigence, but maintained that Washington must close ranks with its ally. Hanoi rejected the proposal to begin the talks within twenty-four hours, anyway, claiming the NLF could not put a delegation together so quickly. Harriman and Vance advocated for a bombing halt even if the NLF did not attend the talks. Clifford killed this idea, but convinced Johnson to drop the twenty-four hour stipulation and proceed with negotiations.<sup>94</sup>

Now Thieu began to raise serious objections to the negotiations procedures. He objected to granting the NLF the right to use the symbols of a legitimate government, such as a flag, because that would imply that the insurgents were the equals of the Republic of Vietnam. While flags might seem like a superfluous detail, they held great meaning for the South Vietnamese. Since neither Saigon nor the NLF acknowledged each other's legitimacy, Washington hoped to organize the talks along an "our side, your side" formula. Under this scheme, the South Vietnamese and Americans would sit as one delegation across from a joint North Vietnamese-NLF team. As an actual government, Saigon clearly lost considerable prestige under this model. Thieu acknowledged that Johnson wanted to be flexible in the negotiations, in order to reduce US casualties, but these talks were a matter of life or death for the South Vietnamese. Bunker was not prepared for the passion with which Thieu defended his interests. The South Vietnamese

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<sup>94</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 336-338; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 493-496.

president went public with his objections to granting the NLF symbolic legitimacy, infuriating Johnson.<sup>95</sup>

Indeed, the White House grew increasingly frustrated with Thieu's public pronouncements. On October 16, for example, Bunker reported that Foreign Minister Tran Chanh Thanh had, on Thieu's orders, informed the representatives of other allied nations that Washington and Saigon were preparing for a bombing halt and peace negotiations.<sup>96</sup> Johnson was enraged by the leak, telling Rusk: "And I just think we oughtn't send Thieu anymore [aid]. To hell with him. I don't care." Johnson explained that he was "tired of the son-of-a-bitch" in Saigon making so much trouble for the White House.<sup>97</sup>

Meanwhile, reports of a new conspiracy emerged. In early October, Dr. Henry Kissinger, a former consultant for the Johnson administration and current adviser to the Republican presidential nominee, passed word of an impending bombing halt to John Mitchell, Richard Nixon's campaign manager. Kissinger had met the Harriman-Vance team prior to their first secret meeting with the North Vietnamese delegates, and therefore had access to restricted information. Nixon intended to use Kissinger's report for his own advantage. The Republican candidate had been purposefully vague about his plans for Vietnam throughout his campaign, because he did not want to alienate any of his potential supporters. He spoke enigmatically about ending the war at campaign rallies, but never

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<sup>95</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 338; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 473, 495; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 584-585.

<sup>96</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 16 October 1968, *FRUS*, September 1968-January 1969, Vol. VII: Document 75.

<sup>97</sup> Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Secretary of State Rusk, 17 October 1968, *FRUS*, September 1968-January 1969, Vol. VII: Document 86.

articulated details about military operations or negotiation strategies. He may have doubted that it was possible to achieve a military victory, but he still hoped for a satisfactory political settlement in Vietnam. He did not think an immediate settlement would be appropriate, however, and sought to take political advantage of the war. He therefore intended to obstruct whatever progress the Johnson administration might make toward negotiations with a bombing halt.<sup>98</sup>

To that end, Nixon enlisted the assistance of Anna Chennault, chair of Republican Women for Nixon and vice chair of the Republican National Finance Committee. She was also a member of the China Lobby, which operated in Washington to promote the interests of the Chinese Nationalists in Taiwan. In early 1968, Chennault invited South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem to meet Nixon. Diem discussed the invitation with Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, who raised no objections to such a meeting. It was not unreasonable for a presidential candidate to desire a meeting with American allies. Bundy was unaware, however, that Nixon had also requested that Diem establish a private channel to communicate with Mitchell.<sup>99</sup>

Bui Diem sent two messages that have been interpreted as evidence of a secret agreement with the Republicans. On October 23, he informed Thieu that, “Many Republican friends have contacted me and encouraged us to stand firm. They were alarmed by press reports to the effect that you had already softened your position.” On

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<sup>98</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 336; Walter Lafeber, *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam, and the 1968 Election* (Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 103-113; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 40-44, 52-57.

<sup>99</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 340; Lafeber, *The Deadly Bet*, 163.

October 27, he wrote, “The longer the present situation continues, the more we are favored.... I am regularly in touch with Nixon and his entourage.” Diem claims in his memoirs that these comments are circumstantial evidence of misconduct, and have been misinterpreted.<sup>100</sup> Still, they constituted particularly damning circumstantial proof.

Chennault has professed innocence, but also provided evidence of a Nixon campaign plot. In her memoirs, she quotes John Mitchell demanding that she convince Thieu to stall the negotiations.<sup>101</sup>

Johnson was aware of the Nixon-Thieu connection, but decided against taking the matter public. He worried that an indictment of a US presidential candidate would create a constitutional crisis for the next administration. Even if Nixon escaped prosecution, moreover, the process would hamstring the new White House, and Nixon would undoubtedly know who leaked the story. Johnson also risked embarrassment because of the illegal wiretaps he used to investigate the Anna Chennault Affair. There is no concrete evidence linking Nixon directly to this conspiracy, so it is impossible to determine his exact level of participation in the plot. The Anna Chennault Affair started in Nixon’s apartment, however, and it is not unreasonable to believe that Mitchell, a close adviser, passed on details of the operation he ran.<sup>102</sup> Given Nixon’s later excursions beyond the confines of American law, it is difficult to believe he would find such conduct morally objectionable.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 340-341.

<sup>101</sup> Anna Chennault, *The Education of Anna* (New York: Time Books, 1980), 190.

<sup>102</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 341-342; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 517-518; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 590-591; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 33-36.

Still, historians may have exaggerated the significance of this scheme. Diem denies that he discouraged Thieu from participating in the Paris talks and Hoang Duc Nha, Thieu's cousin and close adviser, claims that Chennault had no influence over Saigon's policy. Nguyen Cao Ky later insisted that he had convinced Thieu to block Johnson's peace agreement, which the vice president regarded as deeply flawed.<sup>103</sup> Even if Diem had conveyed to Thieu that Nixon would better defend South Vietnam than the Democratic nominee, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, there is no evidence that such information drove policy decisions in Independence Palace. Thieu had more important concerns—such as his determination not to grant the NLF symbolic legitimacy as a government—that sufficiently explain his obstruction of the negotiations.<sup>104</sup>

Thieu, moreover, did not need the Chennault connection to figure out which American political party was better aligned with his interests. According to Chennault, Thieu said without solicitation that Nixon would be a better ally than Humphrey. Nixon occasionally made comments that Thieu might find inconvenient, as when the Republican publicly contemplated a policy of gradually withdrawing American forces from South Vietnam.<sup>105</sup> Humphrey was clearly more eager to reach a peace settlement, though. On September 30, for example, he promised that, "As President, I would stop the bombing of

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<sup>103</sup> Diem with Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, 243-245; Hoang Duc Nha, Comments made at "Voices from the South: New Testimonies from the Last Leaders of South Vietnam," Symposium at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 11-12 June 2012; Nguyen Cao Ky, *Twenty Years and Twenty Days* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1976).

<sup>104</sup> Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>105</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 332; Chennault, *The Education of Anna*, 186.

the North as an acceptable risk for peace....”<sup>106</sup> He also stated plainly that, “I’m going to seek peace in every way possible....”<sup>107</sup> The differences between these candidates should have been plainly obvious to both Diem and Thieu.

The Anna Chennault Affair thus probably represented a vain attempt by Richard Nixon to rig the 1968 US presidential election. The sketchy details available in the Johnson archives and Ms. Chennault’s own account of the incident render Nixon’s skullduggery clear. Chennault’s efficacy as an informal diplomat, however, remains open to debate. There is no evidence that the South Vietnamese needed Chennault to realize that Nixon was more committed to the war than Humphrey, or that her lobbying held much weight compared to Thieu’s own concerns about the Paris peace talks. Until the Vietnamese records are opened, all that can be justifiably argued is that Nixon made an amateurish and illegal attempt to sustain the war in order to secure his election. Nixon defeated his Democratic opponent on November 5, and he had good reason to believe Thieu helped deliver that victory.<sup>108</sup>

Meanwhile, Saigon’s obstructionism continued to frustrate US officials working toward a peace deal. The White House struggled with the possibility that Thieu was right about the dangers of symbolically legitimizing the NLF. Clifford claimed on October 22 that Saigon would gain more than it lost by sending a delegation to Paris. When Johnson acknowledged that the White House would be tacitly legitimizing the NLF by allowing the insurgents to participate, Clifford insisted that such recognition held little danger.

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<sup>106</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 491.

<sup>107</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 579.

<sup>108</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 350.

“Factually, that’s correct,” Johnson agreed. “Emotionally, that’s not correct,” Rusk chimed in. “It’s about like letting Stokely Carmichael sit at [a] Cabinet Meeting.”<sup>109</sup> While Rusk and Johnson seemingly understood Thieu’s reasons for blocking negotiations, the final implication of these comments was that the South Vietnamese president was an irrational child who could not see the “factual” truth in front of him.

Hanoi then tried to break the impasse by proposing to begin the talks on November 2 if the Americans stopped the bombing on October 30. While the NLF might not be able to form a delegation in time for the first meeting, it would do its best to participate as soon as possible. Johnson secured General Abrams’ assurance that such a delay would not put US forces at risk, and Bunker took the matter to Thieu. Rostow proposed sending a letter to Thieu to facilitate Saigon’s concurrence by reaffirming Washington’s commitment to Thieu. The White House insisted that it did not recognize the NLF just by accepting Hanoi’s proposal.<sup>110</sup>

When Thieu first heard of the latest North Vietnamese offer, he told Bunker that, “I don’t see how we can ask for anything more.”<sup>111</sup> He very quickly changed his mind, however. Though Washington and Saigon had originally demanded a rapid transition from a bombing halt to peace talks, Thieu now claimed that he could not put a delegation in Paris by November 2. Bunker told Thieu that there was no good reason for another delay, but still endorsed Saigon’s request for additional time in a cable to Washington.

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<sup>109</sup> Notes on President’s Tuesday Luncheon, 22 October 1968, Box 4, Tom Johnson, Notes of Meetings [Hereafter, TJN], LBJLM.

<sup>110</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 338-339; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 502-509.

<sup>111</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 342-344.

The ambassador was convinced that Thieu would participate in the peace talks if he had more time to bring his advisers along<sup>112</sup>

Johnson, furious that Thieu was still stalling, immediately connected Saigon's intransigence to the Anna Chennault Affair. "It would rock the world if it were said that Thieu was conniving with the Republicans."<sup>113</sup> When Thieu and Ky asked for additional reassurance regarding the negotiations, therefore, Johnson replied that he was "in no mood for reassurances to them." Indeed, his "'confidence in them is deeply shaken—very deeply shaken."<sup>114</sup> Rusk wavered between wanting to confront Thieu and conceding a brief delay, but gradually moved toward the latter position. Clifford was just as enraged as Johnson, however, and flatly rejected Rusk's argument that the United States had sacrificed too much to risk a break with Thieu, now. Harriman and Vance concurred, the former viciously scolding Bunker for endorsing another delay.<sup>115</sup>

To be fair, some US officials were hardly as delicate as they could have been in their consultations with Saigon. While Bunker was often too friendly with Thieu, others had the opposite problem. According to Thieu, for example, Averell Harriman told the South Vietnamese ambassador that Saigon could not prevent the NLF from participating in the talks. While no US archival records support Thieu's claims, a journalist quoted Harriman chastising the ambassador: "Your Government does not represent all of South

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<sup>112</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 584-586; Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 342-344.

<sup>113</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 344-345

<sup>114</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 588.

<sup>115</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 344-345.



Vietnam.”<sup>116</sup> Since Thieu’s claim was precisely that his government did represent all of South Vietnam, Harriman’s comments were obviously worrisome.

Johnson was not convinced that he should press forward with negotiations, despite the consensus of his advisers that Thieu could not be allowed to sabotage the talks. Bunker then reported that Thieu had refused to attend a meeting with him, and Saigon’s foreign minister claimed the government needed “materially more time” to put a delegation together. The ambassador unexpectedly recommended granting Thieu another twenty-four-hour delay. Clifford could not believe what he was hearing from Saigon, but Johnson still hesitated to break with his allies. He worried that pre-election peace talks would be construed as an unscrupulous attempt to aid the Humphrey campaign, and recommended opening the talks on November 4.<sup>117</sup>

On October 30, Bunker reported that Thieu had refused to accept any peace talks before the election. Responding to a message from Washington, in which the White House warned Saigon that it might proceed unilaterally, if necessary, Thieu politely declined to participate in the talks.<sup>118</sup> The American message included a warning that Thieu’s obstruction of the peace talks might infuriate the American public, and thus destroy the White House’s capacity to support Saigon. If that happened, Washington indicated, “God help South Vietnam, because no President could maintain the support of the American people.” Thieu’s responded with defiance. “‘You are powerful,’ he reproached Bunker. ‘You can say to small nations what you want.... But you cannot force

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<sup>116</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 508-509,

<sup>117</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 345-347.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 347.

us to do anything against our interest. This negotiation is not a life or death matter for the US but it is for Vietnam.”<sup>119</sup>

After Clifford ridiculed Thieu’s response as “horseshit,” Johnson ordered a bombing halt on October 31 to facilitate talks beginning on November 6.<sup>120</sup> When Saigon continued to block the negotiations, Johnson warned Nixon and Humphrey about the Anna Chennault Affair: “Some old China hands are going around and implying to some of the Embassies and some others that they might get a better deal out of somebody that was not involved in this. Now that’s made it difficult and it’s held up things a bit, and I know that none of you candidates are aware of it or responsible for it.” Nixon was not surprised to hear of the bombing halt, as he had a spy in the Johnson administration. Historian Herbert Schandler identifies this source as Kissinger, who still had access to secret information.<sup>121</sup> Robert Dallek, however, claims Nixon had another source as well. Former Eisenhower aide Bryce Harlow claimed he had a double agent in the White House, who kept the Nixon campaign apprised of every meeting the Johnson administration held.<sup>122</sup>

As Thieu continued to resist American entreaties, Johnson dispensed with diplomacy and now tried to force Saigon into negotiations. After authorizing a bombing halt, the president announced that the South Vietnamese were “free to participate” in the following week’s peace talks.<sup>123</sup> In a November 1 news conference Rusk tried to maintain

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<sup>119</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 508-509.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 509.

<sup>121</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 347-349.

<sup>122</sup> Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 579-580.

<sup>123</sup> Schandler, “The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968,” 349.

the façade of allied unity and to reassure Thieu by reminding Americans that a bombing halt was not the end of the conflict. To downplay tensions between Saigon and Washington, Rusk claimed that the South Vietnamese were not opposed to peace talks, per se. They had simply expressed concerns about the specific modalities of the negotiations. Rusk therefore minimized Thieu's concerns about recognition of the NLF as an equal negotiating partner. The secretary of state further claimed that it would be best to put aside such "unnecessary complications" and instead focus on the most serious issues of the war, claiming that this opinion was a "pragmatic Anglo-Saxon approach at work." Even as he reassured Thieu, Rusk pressured him to participate in the negotiations.<sup>124</sup>

On November 2, Thieu announced publicly that he would not send a delegation to the talks. In his anger, Johnson told Senator Everett Dirksen (R-IL)—a friend to both Nixon and Johnson who also knew Chennault—that he knew about the Republican plot. Dirksen passed Johnson's displeasure on to Nixon, but the president-elect promised he was not responsible for Thieu's obstinacy.<sup>125</sup>

Clifford was livid, claiming in a departmental meeting that he did not understand why Thieu was betraying Johnson. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze explained that Thieu was anxious about a Humphrey-inspired coalition government. Clifford was unconvinced by such arguments, even though, according to the notes for this meeting, "Nitze keeps trying—in vain—to get [Clifford] to see that there is a rational explanation

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<sup>124</sup> Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 513-514.

<sup>125</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 349-350; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 511.

for Thieu's behavior.”<sup>126</sup> During the November 5 meeting, Clifford again railed against Thieu's “treachery,” and worried that Saigon would “pee away” the US military rollback of the Tet Offensive. The secretary of defense wanted to secure that triumph with a ceasefire, rather than continue combat operations indefinitely just “to try to make the whole country safe for Thieu.”<sup>127</sup>

If anyone had reason to be frustrated with Thieu, it was Ambassador Bunker. He was taking the brunt of Thieu's anger, but he continued to operate as an apologist for Saigon. Bunker had three terse discussions with Thieu at the beginning of November, during which the South Vietnamese president demanded more time to consider the American peace proposals. Thieu grew particularly agitated when Deputy Ambassador Samuel Berger noted that Washington could not support Saigon if Thieu continued to insist that Hanoi could not recognize the NLF as a government.<sup>128</sup>

The ambassador had every reason to be frustrated with his inability to make progress with Thieu. On November 6, however, Bunker provided a long explanation for Thieu's behavior. In Bunker's opinion, Washington expected too much from Thieu. The South Vietnamese president, Bunker noted, did not generally act with haste. The White House had presented Thieu with the biggest decision of his administration—to participate in peace talks or not—and had demanded both a quick answer and secrecy regarding the

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<sup>126</sup> Notes of Meeting, 2 November 1968, *FRUS*, September 1968-January 1969, Vol. VII: Document 180.

<sup>127</sup> Notes of Meeting, 5 November 1968, *FRUS*, September 1968-January 1969, Vol. VII: Document 195.

<sup>128</sup> Outgoing Telegram from the White House [Hereafter, CAP] 82656, Rostow to Johnson, 3 November 1968, Box 41, “Volume 103, November 1-4, 1968,” NSF, Memos to the President [Hereafter, MTP], Walt Rostow [Hereafter, WR], LBJLM.

details of the plan. Under these conditions, Thieu could not consult his colleagues, or “prepare and educate them for the plunge.”<sup>129</sup> Thieu had perhaps been unnecessarily slow in accepting Johnson’s calls for negotiations, but Bunker wanted Washington to understand that the South Vietnamese simply took longer to absorb difficult lessons.

Bunker believed that Thieu was more rational than some of his colleagues, and would eventually accept the American proposals, but he could not be expected to act like an American. The Vietnamese were “not as efficient as we [are] in lining up their political forces, making contingency plans and waiting with ‘execute’ messages.” The ambassador thus bolstered Washington’s prejudices regarding South Vietnamese political sophistication. As well, Bunker noted, Thieu had a genuine political motive to resist negotiations. By standing up to the White House, and asserting South Vietnamese sovereignty, Thieu was trying to save “face” in front of his people.<sup>130</sup>

By emphasizing an alleged Asian obsession with personal status and prestige, Bunker trivialized Thieu’s very real, substantive reasons for not wanting to participate in the peace negotiations. Some scholars argue that face is a real cultural force, and that Asians act differently than Westerners in social exchanges as a result.<sup>131</sup> Even if Asian conceptualizations of “face” differ from Western understandings, Americans are also obviously concerned with their reputations and prestige. Bunker clearly abused the “face”

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<sup>129</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 6 November 1968, *FRUS*, September 1968-January 1969, Vol. VII: Document 200.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> See, for example: Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), particularly p. 252-275; Joo Yup Kim and Sang Hoon Nam, “The Concept and Dynamics of Face: Implications for Organizational Behavior in Asia,” *Organization Science* 9, no. 4 (July-Aug 1998): 522-534.

concept through his insistence that the Vietnamese might need extra time to reach important decisions because they were culturally inferior to Americans.

Several weeks passed before Thieu finally agreed to send a delegation to Paris. His representatives arrived in France on December 8. His intransigence had so shocked the White House that it considered a plan to gradually remove US troops from Vietnam in order to force Thieu to participate in the negotiations. Once all of the warring parties were assembled, however, the South Vietnamese held up the talks on procedural issues until 18 January 1969, two days before Nixon's inauguration. Thieu demanded discussions about everything from flags to the shape of the peace table in order to make sure that the NLF did not gain an unjustifiable symbolic advantage. No substantive results developed from these negotiations for another four years, and Hanoi's lead negotiator declared that progress would be impossible while Thieu remained in power.<sup>132</sup> As Johnson's term as president came to an inglorious end, Thieu's position as president of South Vietnam grew stronger. His new ally, Richard Nixon, was completely devoted to repairing Washington's relationship with Saigon, and supporting Thieu personally.

## **BROKEN FRIENDSHIP**

At the end of the Johnson presidency, the US-South Vietnamese alliance stood at the brink of collapse. Johnson had never been confident in the Republic of Vietnam, which seemed both unstable and incapable of promoting social reform. Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky eventually brought some stability to Saigon, but even they

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<sup>132</sup> Schandler, "The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations After March 31, 1968," 350-351; Prados, "The Shape of the Table," 360; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 523-530.

struggled with domestic and military crises. These incidents convinced US officials that the Vietnamese were primitive and irrational, the products of an under-developed civilization.

Events on the ground strengthened American racism. The series of coups and counter coups after Ngo Dinh Diem's death convinced Washington that the Vietnamese were inherently fractious, and the 1966 Buddhist Crisis enhanced that impression. Saigon's failure to implement the Johnson Doctrine seemingly proved that the Vietnamese could not deliver on priority programs, as did Thieu's reaction to the 1968 peace negotiations. Skeptical of Vietnamese competence, Johnson focused more squarely on maintaining stability. While the State Department wanted a free and fair South Vietnamese presidential election in 1967, the US embassy favored a policy of non-intervention and Johnson chose not to involve himself in this dispute.

Johnson's drive for a peace settlement in the face of Thieu's stalwart obstructionism brought American frustrations with the Vietnamese to the fore. Disgusted with their allies, senior policymakers in Washington nearly sacrificed the alliance with Saigon. Even Thieu's closest American friends, such as Ambassador Bunker, grew exasperated with South Vietnamese officials. The 1968 American presidential election marked a turning point in the Vietnam War, though, as it brought a new leader into the White House who was determined to repair the alliance with Thieu, and put the war effort on a proper footing.

## CHAPTER 2: RAPPROCHEMENT, 1969

When Richard Milhous Nixon first stepped into the Oval Office as president of the United States, he believed he owed Nguyen Van Thieu for helping the Republicans win by stalling Lyndon Johnson's 1968 peace initiative. Thieu paid a price for failing to sign that agreement, as Saigon's relations with Washington grew hostile.<sup>1</sup> Nixon devoted much of his first year in office to repairing the alliance while working to terminate the US military intervention in South Vietnam. At the end of the year, the American president seemed very satisfied with the 1969 rapprochement. Thieu was less enthusiastic; he thought his benefactors were arrogant and rude.<sup>2</sup> He nonetheless cooperated with most of the US agenda, in order to earn considerable goodwill in elite American policymaking circles.

The Nixon administration's prejudices skewed its evaluations of Thieu, allowing the White House to embrace its client in Saigon. Senior officials in Washington and the US embassy in Saigon held a low opinion of other Vietnamese, who squabbled too much for American tastes and resisted the sacrifices the White House demanded in exchange for assistance with the war. When Thieu successfully implemented a priority program, US officials concluded that he was far more competent than most other Vietnamese. When he failed to promote a desired policy, the Nixon administration usually tempered or

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> For studies showing that Thieu felt mistreated by the Nixon Administration, particularly at the Midway Summit, see Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 354-355; Hung and Schecter, 32-34; and William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 339.



dismissed criticism of Thieu on the basis of race. American officials considered Thieu a paragon of South Vietnam, but he was still not an American. The Nixon administration concluded that it would be unfair to evaluate Thieu's performance by American standards. He was sufficiently receptive of American advice to convince the White House that it had repaired the damage inflicted on the alliance in 1968, though, and that it had backed the right strongman in South Vietnam.

### **RICHARD NIXON'S WHITE HOUSE AND FOREIGN POLICY**

The Nixon administration's decision-making process was drastically different from Johnson's. The new American president was determined to override his own secretary of state by personally guiding US foreign policy. As such, his personal opinions about international affairs very directly influenced Washington's relationship with Saigon. To ensure that he exercised direct control over foreign policy, Nixon worked through a small inner circle rather than the entire Cabinet. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, the foremost policymaker within this circle, took an office in the basement of the West Wing from which he could easily reach the president. Kissinger exercised greater power than his predecessors in the Johnson administration, as Nixon reformed and transformed the National Security Council (NSC) into the primary body through which his decisions were implemented. Nixon diminished the State Department's representation and authority in the NSC, granting additional power to Kissinger.<sup>3</sup>

The expansion of the national security adviser's authority meant that other, traditionally prominent officials exercised little influence over Washington's relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 98-100; Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 51-53.

with Thieu. Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird were the two most notable examples. Neither man was sufficiently aggressive for Nixon's tastes. Both were too eager to disengage from the Vietnam War and they demonstrated greater caution than the president preferred in other Cold War arenas. When North Korea shot down a US reconnaissance plane in April 1969, for example, Rogers and Laird argued against retaliation.<sup>4</sup> Rogers had not even been Nixon's first choice for secretary of state, and had little experience in international affairs. His chief virtues, according to historian Melvin Small, were that he was a "discreet negotiator," an "adequate administrator," and that he could tolerate Nixon's leadership on foreign policy. Laird was more powerful, and he better defended his authority than Rogers. The secretary of defense was adept at acquiring information that Kissinger tried to keep to himself.<sup>5</sup> In general, however, Laird had little influence over policy toward Vietnam.

Although Nixon and Kissinger dominated the decision-making process, other officials helped shape the American relationship with Saigon. Laird and Rogers expressed their opinions on multiple occasions, even if they enjoyed little real power. More importantly, however, Nixon asked Ellsworth Bunker to stay on as US ambassador to South Vietnam. The president believed that appointing a new envoy would upset the South Vietnamese, who might interpret such a change as an indication that their alliance with Washington had been shaken. Leaving Bunker in place offered Thieu a sense of

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<sup>4</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 100; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 64; William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," *Cold War History* 3, no. 2 (January 2003): pp. 113-156, p. 117, 120-121.

<sup>5</sup> Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 37-38.

continuity that Nixon hoped would be comforting.<sup>6</sup> The ambassador had been an enthusiastic supporter of Thieu during the Johnson administration. Bunker believed that the South Vietnamese president compared favorably with his countrymen, who had been unable to form a stable government before Thieu ascended to the presidency. In 1969, Bunker's denigration of the Vietnamese as fractious and irrational predisposed the Nixon administration to embrace Nguyen Van Thieu as a stabilizing force in Saigon.

The conflict with in Southeast Asia interfered with Nixon's goals on the larger world stage. When he took office, America was suffering hegemonic decline. The United States no longer had a monopoly on nuclear weapons, as it did immediately after World War II, and the Soviet Union and China presented stiff competition for international primacy. Nixon sought to improve relations with both communist powers, for the sake of global stability. In order to promote such ambitious goals, however, he needed to lessen tensions with the leading communist powers over the Vietnam War.<sup>7</sup>

The president pursued various approaches to end the war, none of which could be considered a strategy, per se. While Nixon claimed during his presidential campaign that he had a "secret plan" to end the Vietnam War, no such scheme existed. Indeed, historian Jeffrey Kimball argues that Nixon never developed a true strategy. The president generally operated along certain strategic principles, but never had a clear plan. He pursued negotiations sporadically throughout the war, and occasionally wagered on ambitious military operations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Schaffer, *Ellsworth Bunker*, 218.

<sup>7</sup> Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 61-64.

<sup>8</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 99-100.

Nixon also tried to influence North Vietnam's communist allies. In exchange for concessions in bilateral economic and strategic negotiations, he hoped that the Soviet Union and China would press the North Vietnamese into seeking a swift end to the war. By leveraging an effort to improve relations with the Soviet Union, a policy called détente, Nixon believed he could convince Moscow to pressure Hanoi toward an acceptable peace settlement. Similarly, when tensions erupted between the Soviet Union and China, Nixon tried to play the communist powers against each other. Nixon pursued rapprochement with China, hoping to gain yet another ally in his diplomatic struggle with North Vietnam. At the same time, the tensions between Moscow and Beijing encouraged each communist power to compete for détente with the United States, in order to prevent their rivals from gaining a significant geostrategic advantage. Unfortunately for Nixon, this triangular diplomacy failed, as neither the Soviet Union nor China had the authority or inclination to force Hanoi's hand.<sup>9</sup>

The president's most famous strategic principles, however, were the Madman Theory and the Nixon Doctrine. According to the Madman Theory, the White House portrayed the president as an unpredictable rogue who, in his rage, would use excessive force to defend American interests. The goal was to convince Hanoi that it could not defeat the United States, because an irrational Nixon would use every tool at his disposal to achieve his goals. Nixon wanted to convince his enemies that he did not operate under

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<sup>9</sup> Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 61-64, 97-101, 118-120.

the same restrictions as Lyndon Johnson. He even initiated a nuclear readiness test in 1969, hoping to terrify Hanoi into conceding defeat in South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

The Nixon Doctrine reflected the president's devotion to realpolitik, the principle that national interests should take priority over ethical considerations, and helped shape the White House's evaluations of Thieu. While Nixon's early political career was marked by traditional Cold War hawkishness, he was far less doctrinaire by the time he became president. In 1969, he was more committed to promoting global stability than social justice or reform. Kissinger held similar views, and thus reinforced the president's instincts on foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> Seeking an exit from Vietnam without sacrificing the stability of that country, Nixon reversed the Johnson doctrine. The previous administration had dedicated the United States to social reform and nation building in Southeast Asia. Some US officials, particularly Ambassador Bunker and senior State Department personnel, promoted nation-building projects as a means to help stabilize South Vietnam. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger believed such efforts were necessary or appropriate.<sup>12</sup> As Nixon put it after his 1969 meeting with Thieu at Guam, "... I believe that the time has come when... as far as the problems of internal security are concerned, as far as the problems of military defense, except for the threat of a major power

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<sup>10</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 76-86; William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert, 113-156.

<sup>11</sup> Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 59-60; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 65-67; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 249.

<sup>12</sup> Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 62-63.

involving nuclear weapons, that... this problem will be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves.”<sup>13</sup>

The Nixon Doctrine changed the focus of the US war effort, as the White House gradually began to replace US military forces with South Vietnamese units. This policy, known as Vietnamization, also called for the slow abandonment of American responsibility for internal reforms and development in South Vietnam. Initially, at least, the Nixon administration launched a combination of military and political campaigns to help Saigon cope with diminishing American troop levels. Collectively known as “pacification,” these programs were mainstays of previous administrations that resulted in very limited success.<sup>14</sup> Paul Warnke, Johnson’s assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, originally designed the Vietnamization program and began to implement it in 1968.<sup>15</sup> The Nixon administration adopted the program, and made it a cornerstone of the war effort.

For the Nixon Doctrine to work, the White House needed an effective ally in Saigon’s Independence Palace. Since the United States was reducing the scope of its military intervention, a strongman was needed to lead the war effort and stave off the kind

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Nixon, “Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen,” 25 July 1969, published online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)), © 1999-2011. The fate of nation-building programs after 1968 has not attracted significant scholarly attention. Christopher T. Fisher, “Nation Building and the Vietnam War: A Historiography,” *Pacific Historical Review* 74, 3 (2005): 441-446, p. 455.

<sup>14</sup> John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 115-187; Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 62-63; Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 99; Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 142.

<sup>15</sup> Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 65-66.

of turbulence that destabilized South Vietnam after Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination in 1963. To some degree, Nixon chose his client by default. Nguyen Van Thieu was already in power, and there was no immediately convenient way to replace him if Washington so desired. Nixon was personally inclined to support Thieu, however. The US president believed that Thieu's resistance to Johnson's 1968 peace initiative helped the Republicans take the White House, and Nixon wanted to repay that debt.<sup>16</sup> Thieu was also more successful than any of his predecessors, though, and was strong enough to facilitate American troop withdrawals. As the US-South Vietnamese alliance was repaired during Nixon's first year in office, Thieu earned greater support among senior US policymakers. Many US officials judged the Vietnamese as petty, fractious, inefficient, and irrational. Given such prejudices, Thieu's cooperative attitude and partial successes convinced the White House that he was an exception to the rule of South Vietnamese racial inferiority. Thieu was not immune to American criticism, but he was held to a low standard because his countrymen and colleagues seemed much worse.

The Nixon administration was generally pleased with Thieu's performance in 1969, even though the South Vietnamese president did not always welcome American advice, to which he responded in two ways. First, Thieu sometimes accepted American recommendations and tried to implement them, earning the praise of the Nixon administration. This kind of successful cooperation emerged when Thieu either agreed

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<sup>16</sup> Nixon explicitly credited Thieu with helping the Republicans win the election. See, for example: Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, Camp David Study Table [Hereafter, CDST], 21 August 1972, 10:26 a.m. – 10:41 a.m. White House Tapes [Hereafter, WHT], Conversation 140-55. Available online at the RNLM website. See also Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 78

with American advice or when Nixon and Kissinger—the dominant American policymakers—were personally invested in an issue. Thieu therefore agreed to implement economic reforms to bolster South Vietnamese revenue and curb rampant inflation, promote Nixon's Vietnamization program, revitalize the pacification campaign, initiate a new land reform program, and establish a reasonable South Vietnamese position on peace negotiations. Thieu originally balked at some of these programs, fearing the South Vietnamese would revolt against demands for greater sacrifices of treasure and blood. His eventual compliance bolstered his reputation at the White House, while his domestic political opponents earned American scorn for their resistance to US policies.

Second, Thieu derailed the nation-building initiatives recommended by the State Department and the US embassy, but considered unnecessary by Nixon and Kissinger. Bunker and the State Department pleaded with Thieu to build a political alliance that would allow him to compete with the National Liberation Front (NLF) insurgents, should they be incorporated into the government after a peace agreement. Bunker also wanted Thieu to reform his Cabinet so that it better reflected South Vietnam's regional and cultural diversity, which would help him garner popular support. Thieu blocked both of these reforms, but the White House rationalized and even defended his actions. Senior US policymakers concluded that the fractious nature of South Vietnamese society made rallying the people a daunting task, and Thieu's new Cabinet was more effective at implementing government policies, even if it remained unrepresentative of South Vietnamese society. Faced with stern resistance from Thieu and lacking the support of Nixon and Kissinger, Bunker relented. The ambassador convinced himself that Thieu was



doing the best he could and the White House backed the Thieu regime, despite its failings.

### **WORKING WITH SUPERMAN: THIEU'S COOPERATION WITH NIXON**

The prejudices of the Nixon administration helped protect Thieu's reputation, a process the South Vietnamese president facilitated by not strongly resisting Nixon's highest-priority programs. Thieu's friendly cooperation and limited successes gave him the aura of a South Vietnamese superman in 1969, and helped him garner American support. He thus compared quite favorably with his domestic political opponents, who voiced dissent on policies the White House supported.

When Thieu accepted and successfully implemented American advice, he earned praise from the White House. These accomplishments yielded him a reputation for hard work, strong leadership, and rational pragmatism—all qualities the Nixon administration believed other Vietnamese lacked. The White House facilitated Thieu's friendly cooperation by dedicating itself to rapprochement with Saigon. Nixon believed the Johnson administration had been unduly harsh on Thieu, so he pledged in January 1969 to offer better support for Saigon.<sup>17</sup> Declaring that he was tired of seeing the South Vietnamese "kicked around," he ordered his administration to end all public and private criticism of the Thieu regime during an January 25 NSC meeting.<sup>18</sup> This protection was extended specifically to Thieu, with whom Nixon associated the wellbeing of the whole

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<sup>17</sup> Memorandum of a Conversation, 19 January 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, VI: 2-3 (Document 2).

<sup>18</sup> Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, 25 January 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, VI: 23-41 (Document 10).

country.<sup>19</sup> In March, Nixon promised Saigon's delegation to the peace negotiations in Paris: "We are not... going to double-cross you."<sup>20</sup> Nixon reaffirmed this pledge when met with Thieu during a summit on Midway Island in June and visited him in Saigon the following month. Both Secretaries Laird and Rogers also toured South Vietnam in 1969, hoping to strengthen the alliance.<sup>21</sup>

Thieu encouraged the American rapprochement project by making significant progress reforming South Vietnam's struggling economy and by embracing Vietnamization. Since he triumphed over bitter opposition in Saigon, Bunker portrayed Thieu as a strong leader willing to make difficult sacrifices. By implication, the rest of the Vietnamese were selfish and venal. In truth, Thieu did not always achieve everything he hoped for in these political battles, but the White House believed he accomplished as much as could be reasonably expected. American perceptions were thus more important than realities on the ground. It was not a question of whether Thieu resolved Saigon's economic problems or not. He was apparently exerting herculean efforts to overcome a

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<sup>19</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Draft Telegram from the Department of State to Ambassadors Bunker and Lodge: Presidential Meeting with GVN, 10 February 1969, Box 62, Folder 5, National Security Council Files [Hereafter, NSCF], Vietnam Subject Files [Hereafter VSF], Richard Nixon Library and Museum [Hereafter, RNLN]; Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, 2 March 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, VI: 84-86 (Document 28).

<sup>21</sup> Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 6 March 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, VI: 87-88 (Document 29); Meeting of Secretary of Defense with President Thieu, 8 March 1969, Box 70, Folder 13, NSCF, VSF, RNLN; Embtel 6597 from Bangkok, 22 May 1969, Box 137, Folder 4, NSCF, Vietnam Country File [Hereafter, VCF], RNLN; Memorandum of a Conversation, 8 June 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 248-252 (Document 81); "Text of Communiqué by Nixon and Thieu After the Midway Talks," *New York Times*, 9 June 1969; Memorandum of Conversation: Saigon, Independence Palace, 30 July 1969, 1 August 1969, Box 138, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLN.

long-term challenge, and Washington believed in 1969 that he was moving in the right direction. As Nixon accelerated Vietnamization, Thieu simply had no choice but to cooperate. There was nothing he could do to stop the process, and he chose not to sacrifice his ally's patronage in a futile battle to keep US troops in South Vietnam.

Of course, Thieu did not always produce promising results. His land reform and pacification programs both hit roadblocks, and Thieu made only a half-hearted effort to pursue a peace settlement. Thieu's attempts to cooperate in good faith protected his reputation in the White House, which laid blame for failure on other elements of the South Vietnamese government. The Nixon administration blamed Saigon's legislators for failing to promote Thieu's ambitious land reform initiative. While Thieu seemed to demonstrate strong support for pacification in 1969, South Vietnam still remained vulnerable to insurgent attacks. American officials blamed lower echelons of the South Vietnamese government for failing to act with the same vigor and determination as their president. Although the Paris Peace talks appeared to be going nowhere, Thieu convinced the Nixon administration that he was preparing the South Vietnamese population for a political settlement of the war. Thieu later proved less flexible on peace issues than US officials desired, but the façade of flexibility he created played into American bigotry. The White House concluded that the South Vietnamese were a backward people who needed an education in the virtues of pragmatism from their enlightened leader. Even when he failed to successfully implement American advice, Thieu maintained his reputation as the only competent man in South Vietnam.

Among US officials, Bunker and the State Department were the chief advocates of economic reform. Nixon briefly encouraged an American scheme to promote capitalist development in South Vietnam, but US officials quickly focused on the more immediate goal of stabilizing Saigon's economy. Kissinger agreed that such reforms were important, but he insisted that his colleagues demanded too much, too quickly from Saigon.<sup>22</sup> A functional economy is a critical component of any stable government, however, and Thieu eventually acknowledged that reform was in his interest. Bunker thus encouraged Saigon to implement major austerity measures and modify the exchange rate of the South Vietnamese piaster. Thieu seemed interested in cooperating, so neither Nixon nor Kissinger attempted to obstruct economic reforms. The austerity package Thieu produced at the end of the year proved controversial in South Vietnam, as struggling families and businesses were forced to pay higher taxes. Thieu impressed his American benefactors by promoting economic reform despite the dissent, however, and thereby built a reputation among Americans for strong leadership and willing self-sacrifice.

The war and American assistance greatly distorted the South Vietnamese economy. Agricultural production collapsed, imports increased, manufacturing declined, corruption became endemic, and inflation spiked. The Johnson administration had some success using foreign aid to stabilize the South Vietnamese economy, but the Tet Offensive and Vietnamization intensified the inflation problem. As a result, officials from both countries embarked on economic stabilization negotiations in 1969. The US and

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<sup>22</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 38, 150; Douglas C. Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development: South Vietnam, 1955-1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 27-28.

South Vietnamese delegates were specifically interested in raising revenue and reducing inflation. Progress was slow. Thieu was disinclined to seek legislative approval for controversial laws, at this moment, because his government was in the middle of delicate political negotiations with the enemy. The South Vietnamese president did not want to weaken his position in the peace talks by stirring dissent at home, which might put the legitimacy of his government in question. In May, the best Thieu could offer was to use his executive authority to implement limited reforms. Bunker doubted that modest policy changes would be sufficient to remedy Saigon's economic problems, so he promised the State Department he would keep pushing for a comprehensive reform package. The ambassador recommended holding back some foreign assistance until Saigon produced satisfactory results.<sup>23</sup>

Bunker's plan to coerce Saigon into implementing economic reforms was a major miscalculation. While Thieu agreed that he would need to devalue the South Vietnamese piaster at some point in the fall, he refused to take substantial steps to increase government revenues. Bunker then threatened to hold back forty million dollars from the Commercial Import Program (CIP). Through this program, the United States manipulated trade laws to invest vast sums of money into the South Vietnamese economy without triggering intolerable inflation. Soon after issuing this threat, Bunker realized that he did not have enough leverage to force Thieu to enact economic reforms and did not want to

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<sup>23</sup> Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 223-230; Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development: South Vietnam*, 9-14, 27-29; Nguyen Anh Tuan, *South Vietnam, Trial and Experience: A Challenge for Development* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1987), 142-144; Embtel 8757, 6 May 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

spark a serious confrontation with Saigon. The ambassador released the CIP funds in exchange for a restricted reform package that failed to address Saigon's core economic problems.<sup>24</sup>

Thieu resented the attempted coercion, claiming there were rumors that the White House was holding back aid in exchange for concessions to Hanoi in the peace negotiations. He took advantage of the tensions, though, by telling forty-eight Vietnamese legislators that the nation faced a tremendous economic problem. They either had to agree to lower government expenditures, in order to curb inflation, or face devaluation of the piaster. Thieu's posturing may have been designed to impress the ambassador and lay blame for the meager reforms on the National Assembly. At Bunker's urging, Kissinger lobbied Nixon not to trigger an argument with Thieu over economic reform when the two presidents met at Midway. Nixon thus ignored the Agency for International Development's pleas for a summit discussion on Saigon's tax collection problems.<sup>25</sup>

Bunker had not yet given up, and consultations continued over the next several months. On October 23, the ambassador's patience finally paid off when Thieu accepted Washington's economic reform proposals. He intended to inform the leadership of both houses of the National Assembly of the new program, and expected them to act within a couple weeks. The Assembly condemned the controversial austerity measures, however,

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<sup>24</sup> Embtel 9879, 20 May 1969, Box 137, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 99.

<sup>25</sup> Embtel 10177, 23 May 1969, Box 137, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Presidential Briefing Book for Midway, Vol. 2, Tab N: Economic Situation and Prospects, 8 June 1969, Box 71, Folder 3, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Presidential Briefing Book for Midway, Vol. 2, Tab N: Memorandum for the President: Stabilization Negotiations in Vietnam, 8 June 1969, Box 71, Folder 3, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Memorandum of a Conversation, 8 June 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 248-252 (Document 81).

so Thieu was forced to impose them by decree. In an attempt to manage the backlash, he agreed to lower taxes on five items, reducing Saigon's revenues by approximately five billion piasters. Thieu told the Senate and Budget Committee that it needed to offset the loss.<sup>26</sup>

Bunker called the tax decree "an act of high [p]olitical courage but of poor political implementation."<sup>27</sup> The ambassador praised Saigon for passing an economic reform package without first receiving US commitments for assistance. Thieu mishandled public opinion and the National Assembly, however, by failing to publicize measures designed to protect the poorest consumers. When inflation spiked—imported commodity prices jumped twenty-five to thirty percent in anticipation of the austerity measures, and the general price index increased 4.1 percent between November 1969 and February 1970—Saigon belatedly initiated a public relations campaign. It was a little late, but Thieu nonetheless instituted significant and complicated reforms.<sup>28</sup> His willingness to make necessary, if unpalatable, sacrifices in the face of tremendous opposition marked him as a man of great character, at least to some members of the Nixon administration.

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<sup>26</sup> Embtel 17347, 27 August 1969, Box 138, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 17707, 1 September 1969, Box 139, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Telegram from the Department of State [Hereafter, Deptel] 162064 [All deptels are to Saigon unless otherwise stated], 24 September 1969, Box 139, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 20975, 18 October 1969, Box 139, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 21284, 23 October 1969, Box 139, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 22932, 16 November 1969, Box 140, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 23096, 18 November 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>27</sup> Embtel 23096, 18 November 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM. Brackets indicate a corrected typographical error in the original document.

<sup>28</sup> Embtel 23096, 18 November 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 25132, 24 December 1969, Box 141, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development*, 165; Nguyen Anh Tuan, *South Vietnam, Trial and Experience*, 156.

Bunker did not report the National Assembly's reasons for protesting Thieu's austerity measures. The legislators were not opposed to increasing taxes, in principle, but they resented Thieu's imposition of taxes without consulting the Assembly, which had constitutional jurisdiction over legislation. The Assemblymen also criticized the scale of Thieu's reforms. The president imposed 1,523 austerity taxes, increasing the price of goods the government deemed non-essential to the war effort between 100% and 650%. The legislators argued that the executive had not practiced austerity, and was now passing the economic burdens of the war on to people who could not afford it. They also noted that taxes on gasoline—one of the goods labeled non-essential—would increase the prices of a broad array of products, and that the government did not have the capacity to effectively control prices or collect taxes.<sup>29</sup>

Thieu's meager attempts to raise revenue for his government were nearly thwarted when the South Vietnamese Supreme Court threatened to declare the tax decree unconstitutional. Thieu tried to gain Assembly approval of the decree before the Court could make such ruling, but Bunker doubted the legislators would suddenly reverse their previous decision. On December 12, the Court ruled that there was no legal basis for the tax. The Assembly had effectively withdrawn its objections, however, by failing to

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<sup>29</sup> Allan E. Goodman, *Politics in War: The Bases of Political Community in South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 136-138. For more information, see Nguyen Anh Tuan, *South Vietnam, Trial and Experience*, 152-157.



submit arguments against the decree. Thieu continued to seek approval of the decree in an omnibus revenue bill, but his popularity plummeted.<sup>30</sup>

Thieu reacted to the economic crisis at his own pace. Bunker's leverage—in the form of the CIP funds—was limited, because he was worried about a major confrontation between Saigon and Washington. The South Vietnamese president redeemed himself after hesitating, however, when he took bold steps to meet his benefactors' demand for economic reform despite the threat of domestic unrest. The resistance Thieu faced from the National Assembly over tax increases and spending cuts seemed to justify his initial reluctance, but his decision to implement austerity measures by fiat yielded significant American goodwill. Thieu's friendly cooperation enhanced his reputation in Washington as an exceptional Vietnamese leader in a culture that Americans considered corrupt.

A similar dynamic shaped the negotiations over troop replacements. Nixon's strategy for disengaging from Vietnam included peace negotiations and Vietnamization, the gradual replacement of American soldiers with South Vietnamese troops. Thieu tried to embrace the latter program even though he feared that US withdrawals would leave South Vietnam vulnerable. He expanded and improved his military (known as the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, or RVNAF) to compensate for US withdrawals. Realizing he could not deter Nixon from implementing Vietnamization, Thieu decided not to contest this particular American policy too strongly. By feigning friendly

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<sup>30</sup> Embtel 24272, 8 December 1969, Box 141, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 24914, 19 December 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Goodman, *Politics in War*, 137.

cooperation, Thieu once again protected himself from the Nixon administration's prejudices toward the Vietnamese.

Thieu also endorsed Vietnamization because he understood that continued foreign assistance depended on controlling American domestic opinion. During a visit to Saigon, Laird promised Thieu he would request a supplemental budget to modernize the RVNAF. Thieu appeared agreeable, figuring he could not stop Nixon from withdrawing American troops just when he desperately needed the assistance.<sup>31</sup> He was also trying to maneuver the White House into retaliatory attacks over enemy offensives against Saigon and Hue, which finally took the form of a bombing campaign called Operation Menu.<sup>32</sup>

On March 22, Kissinger received an interagency response to National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 1 regarding multiple elements of the war effort. The final report concluded that the RVNAF was underperforming and could not hold out against a determined enemy on its own. There was a lull in violence in early 1969, but only because the NLF was preserving its strength. The RVNAF had swelled from 743,000 soldiers in December 1967 to 826,000 by March 1969, and had improved marginally under Thieu. Even still, it was not yet a viable threat to the enemy. At the beginning of 1969, the allies intended to further increase South Vietnamese ranks to 876,000. Regular forces were fully outfitted with M-16s and were acquiring independent artillery and

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<sup>31</sup> Memorandum for the Record: Remarks Made by President Nguyen Van Thieu on the Paris Peace Talks, Political Problems in South Viet-Nam Resulting From a Ceasefire, Government Reorganization, Pacification Program, GVN Contacts with the Other Side at Paris and Troop Withdrawals, 3 February 1969, "GVN Private Position, 1969," Box 26, Lot 76D431, Record Group [Hereafter, RG] 59, National Archives and Records Administration [Hereafter, NARA]; Meeting of Secretary of Defense with President Thieu, 8 March 1969, Box 70, Folder 13, NSCF, VSF, RNLN.

<sup>32</sup> See the discussion of the peace process below for more details.

helicopter support. Unfortunately, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) faced crises of motivation, leadership, and desertion. Promotions were based on political patronage rather than competence, further limiting combat effectiveness, and even the political reliability of the RVNAF was debatable.<sup>33</sup>

In May, Thieu expressed concern that US forces would leave before the South Vietnamese military was ready to assume the burdens of war. He wanted the rate of withdrawals linked to improvements in RVNAF fighting power. Kissinger urged Nixon to promise Thieu that Vietnamization would be manageable so long as Saigon promoted the program. In May, after Nixon publicly announced a new peace proposal, Thieu called for a meeting to discuss US troop withdrawals. The two presidents met in June at the Midway Summit, but despite the South Vietnamese president's entreaties to slow the rate of the American exodus, Nixon insisted that he would announce the withdrawal of 25,000 more US soldiers in July. At Kissinger's urging, the joint communiqué for the Midway Summit portrayed troop replacement as one of Thieu's initiatives that earned Americans support, rather than a project imposed on Saigon. In order to control South Vietnamese public opinion, Thieu presented Vietnamization as an effort to make his country self-sufficient. Bunker believed Saigon had some success with this public relations campaign. By August, troop replacements had reportedly become a source of pride for both civilians

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<sup>33</sup> National Security Study Memorandum 1, 21 January 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 4-10 (Document 4); Summary of the Interagency Response to NSSM 1, 22 March 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 129-152 (Document 44). For an excellent analysis of the problems ARVN faced, see Robert Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

and the ARVN. The State Department received reports, however, that Thieu was still publicly expressing anxiety about troop withdrawals.<sup>34</sup>

Bunker usually declined to report the sources of South Vietnamese opposition to Vietnamization, preferring instead to reference a nebulous group of irrational figures cowering at the thought of taking up their share of the war burdens. The US ambassador reported that most opponents of Vietnamization were conservative politicians, however, and drew specific attention to the Catholic newspapers Xay Dung and Hoa Binh, which editorialized that US troop withdrawals would give the communists an advantage. Some South Vietnamese generals—Bunker declined to mention their names—also feared that American withdrawals would hamper ARVN's morale and efficacy. In general, the ambassador claimed, South Vietnamese approval of Vietnamization was strongest in Saigon and lowest in areas where combat operations were most intense.<sup>35</sup>

Nixon exacerbated Thieu's concerns about rapid Vietnamization by announcing on September 16 that another 35,000 US soldiers would leave South Vietnam by mid-December. According to Bunker's deputy, Samuel Berger, Thieu began acting out in various ways. First, Vice President Ky leaked the number of troops to be withdrawn to

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<sup>34</sup> Backchannel Message from the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 21 May 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 223-225 (Document 70); Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 4 June 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 243-246 (Document 79); Memorandum of a Conversation, 8 June 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 248-252 (Document 81); "Text of Joint Communiqué Issued After Nixon-Thieu Talks," *New York Times*, 4 April 1973; Embtel 16131, 11 August 1969, Box 138, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Deptel 154490, 11 September 1969, Box 139, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 140-144; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 127-130.

<sup>35</sup> Embtel 16131, 11 August 1969, Box 138, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM;

the press on September 15, before Nixon could do so himself. Berger suggested that Ky acted on Thieu's urging. Second, Thieu refused to participate in a three-day truce with Hanoi after Ho Chi Minh died, as the White House had agreed. Finally, Saigon claimed that Nixon had promised not to withdraw further troops until Hanoi compromised at the peace table and the intensity of enemy attacks in South Vietnam diminished. Berger argued that all of these acts of resistance were related to Thieu's fears that the United States would sell out Saigon in the Paris negotiations or accelerate Vietnamization.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps realizing he risked losing his ally's support, Thieu moderated his position and restored Washington's confidence. After his hesitant resistance to Vietnamization, he shifted back into the pattern of successful cooperation with the White House. Thieu claimed publicly that Saigon could replace 100,000 to 150,000 US troops in 1970 if South Vietnam received sufficient aid. Berger figured that Thieu was expressing unease about the alliance, but was making an awkward attempt to mitigate American domestic dissent and prepare his people for the inevitable. He continued to press the White House for a withdrawal schedule, but Nixon wanted the flexibility to react to events on the ground. His request unmet, Thieu told Bunker that such numbers could only be replaced if RVNAF ranks were bolstered to 1.1 million soldiers. The ambassador endorsed Thieu's recommendation and, in mid-December, assured Saigon that withdrawals would be

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<sup>36</sup> Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 146; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 153; Memorandum from Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon: Progress toward a Vietnam Solution, 17 October 1969, Box 140, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 19453, 26 September 1969, Box 139, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 165.

scheduled according to conditions on the ground. Three days later, Nixon announced that 50,000 more soldiers would be withdrawn by 15 April 1970.<sup>37</sup>

Thieu had little power over the pace of Vietnamization. Washington was content to let Thieu pretend that the troop replacements were his idea, but Ky's leak put even that at risk. John Holdridge, an NSC staffer, recommended that Kissinger warn South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem that the United States would not consult Thieu on troop withdrawals if Saigon could not keep the details secret until the White House announced them.<sup>38</sup> Thieu tried to discourage Nixon from withdrawing soldiers quickly, but the White House was not prepared to compromise. The very futility of Thieu's struggle insulated him from American criticism. Since he could not influence the rate of troop withdrawals, he never threatened this crucial American interest. Thieu eventually gave up and embraced Vietnamization, so Nixon could continue pursuing rapprochement with Saigon.

As with economic reforms, Thieu hesitated to cooperate with his US advisers on Vietnamization. American troop withdrawals were controversial in Saigon, because the South Vietnamese feared they would become vulnerable to enemy attacks. Thieu indirectly challenged the rapid rate of US withdrawals, but he nonetheless endorsed and cooperated with the program in order to demonstrate that he was willing to make

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<sup>37</sup> Embtel 19697, 30 September 1969, Box 139, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Henry Kissinger: Appointment with Ambassador Bunker, 3 October 1969, Box 78, Folder 7, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 22524, 10 November 1969, Box 140, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 24574, 12 December 1969, Box 65, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace*, 161.

<sup>38</sup> Memorandum from John Holdridge to Henry Kissinger: Your Meeting with Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem, 26 November 1969, Box 140, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

pragmatic compromises in order to maintain the alliance with Washington. Bunker contrasted Thieu's sacrifice with the protests of a shadowy group of political opponents who feared the Saigon would collapse if denied American protection.

Thieu's land reform initiative further separated him in American minds from the rest of South Vietnam's other political elites. The National Assembly's stifled Thieu's attempts to grant landless peasants property, enhancing the legislators' reputation for venality and needless factionalism. Even though Thieu failed to get his land reform project past the Assembly in 1969, US officials were so impressed with his efforts in this realm that they continued to perceive him as a bold and effective leader.

South Vietnam had an ignominious history with land reform. The Viet Minh, predecessors to the NLF, had garnered significant popular support in the South after 1941 by redistributing over 600,000 hectares of French property to landless peasants. The revolutionaries also lowered rents for tenant farmers, and abolished pre-1945 debts to landlords. Between 1955 and 1956, President Ngo Dinh Diem sought to reverse Viet Minh fortunes by initiating his own land reform policy, focused mostly on Viet Minh strongholds in the Mekong Delta. Diem's policy alienated many Vietnamese, because it reversed Viet Minh land grants to the peasantry. Under Diem's law, landlords could keep one hundred and fifteen hectares of land, and could see to it that redistributed land went to their family members. This provision did not placate landlords, however, who believed they deserved compensation for their land. As Diem implemented his land reform agenda, moreover, he expanded his control over local communities. He abolished the village councils through which landlords had traditionally exercised great power, and sent his

own representatives to govern villages and arrest dissidents. By 1961, Diem's land reform project had effectively stalled, though it still operated in a limited fashion, with much of the available land remaining undistributed.<sup>39</sup>

Land reform remained an important issue in South Vietnam after Diem's death, but Saigon did not make it a priority. The NLF began redistributing land in the early 1960s, and thus earned significant popular sympathy. Much of the NLF land reform project was administered in an ad hoc manner, so the results varied across regions. The insurgents' asked wealthy landholders to voluntarily redistribute their property, but obviously there was also an element of coercion. While the amount of land reallocated to peasants changed according to local availability, the NLF dealt in far lower tracts of land than Saigon's one-hundred-and-fifteen-hectare ownership limit. Typically, the NLF offered a poor peasant family less than one hectare of land, though wealthier families were sometimes allowed to retain larger properties. The insurgents therefore gave poor Vietnamese an interest in supporting the Revolution. President Lyndon Johnson, who had championed social reforms in the United States through his Great Society program, wanted Saigon to weaken the appeal of the NLF among the peasantry by enacting its own land reform project. The South Vietnamese government deflected this pressure, however, fearing that such reforms would alienate powerful landowners.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 92-95, 129.

<sup>40</sup> Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 129-130; Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 104-105; David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta*, Vol. 1 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 437-523.



The Thieu regime did little about land reform until the end of Lyndon Johnson's term in the White House. In September 1968, Thieu announced that peasants could keep land redistributed by the NLF. He also launched a campaign for a new land reform law, which eventually created the Land-to-the-Tiller Program, and tried to assuage the concerns of large landowners by promising them compensation. Scholars differ over the effectiveness of the Land-to-the-Tiller initiative, and how much popular support he earned in South Vietnam.<sup>41</sup> As his campaign for a new land reform law progressed, however, Thieu improved his status with the Nixon administration.

Bunker and Thieu discussed land reform shortly after Nixon's inauguration. Thieu claimed that land redistribution was one of his highest priorities for the year, and he already had ideas about how to approach it. First, the competing land reform initiatives administered by the Vietnamese revolutionaries and South Vietnamese government had created a confusing array of difficult land occupancy disputes. Peasants who received land from the Viet Minh, for example, had often seen their property confiscated by the Diem regime. Thieu temporarily halted all transactions so each case could be resolved individually. He expressed disappointment with the pace of redistribution under the

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<sup>41</sup> For pessimistic appraisals, see: Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 388-394; William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954-1975* (London: Westview Press, 1986), 130-131; Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, V. 1-2, 444-454, 1235-1244, 1371. For ambivalent appraisals, see: Hunt, *Pacification*, 263-265; Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 298-300. For optimistic appraisals, see: Roy L. Prosterman and Jeffrey M. Riedinger, *Land Reform and Democratic Development* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 133-141; MacDonald Salter, "The Broadening Base of Land Reform in South Vietnam," *Asian Survey* 10, no. 8 (August 1970): 724-737; Willard C. Muller, *End-of-Tour Report: The Land-to-the-Tiller Program: The Operational Phase* (Washington, DC: United States Agency for International Development, April 1973), available at: [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNABQ699.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABQ699.pdf).

largely defunct land reform program started by Ngo Dinh Diem. Thieu planned to revitalize this initiative and reorganize it to improve efficiency. He was even working with the National Assembly to lower the maximum land ownership limit, and thus free up more property for redistribution. Though he did not share the details of this legislative plan with Bunker, he expected the Assembly would pass such a law in February.<sup>42</sup>

Saigon, of course, did not have the funds to implement an extravagant new land reform program, so Thieu turned to his allies. He promised Rogers that he would take full political advantage of the program if Washington provided funding. The NLF had difficulty upholding its land reform program, because it could not permanently control territory in South Vietnam. Thieu had the capacity to make land transfers permanent and also to help peasants acquire fertilizer, pesticides, seeds, and credit. While Thieu's other attempts to unite his country were unmitigated disasters, he believed that he could build a broad base of support through land reform. After a few questions about the financial and administrative challenges associated with the project, Rogers promised to give land reform funding requests a sympathetic hearing.<sup>43</sup>

There was considerable support for Thieu's land reform proposal in Washington. Representative Jonathan Bingham (D-NY), for example, expressed his hope that land reform would strengthen the Thieu regime. Perhaps spurred on by Congressional support for this program, Nixon took a personal interest in land reform. During his visit to Saigon in July, the American president asked if the National Assembly would pass the land

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<sup>42</sup> Embtel 1424, 23 January 1969, Box 62, Folder 4, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, V. 1, 444-446.

<sup>43</sup> Embtel 6597 from Bangkok, 22 May 1969, Box 137, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

reform bill. Thieu was optimistic, but on September 9 the Lower House passed a toothless version of Thieu's original bill. Deputy Ambassador Berger speculated that Thieu would likely need to amend the final law by decree, which risked triggering a backlash from wealthy landowners with strong influence in the National Assembly. Nixon and Kissinger ordered Bunker to remind Thieu that Washington wanted a new land reform law regardless of political opposition in Saigon.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the legislative failure in 1969, Thieu's land reform initiative was a key element behind the Nixon administration's continued support him. The Assembly's obstruction of the land reform bill made the legislators appear venal, while Thieu positioned himself as a champion of the people. While he failed to achieve his legislative goals, as with his economic reforms, Thieu's promotion of the Land-to-the-Tiller Program improved his reputation in American policymaking circles.

In addition to his land reform efforts, Thieu received great praise from the Nixon administration for supporting pacification, a broad political and military campaign to secure communities from outside forces and build popular goodwill. In late 1968, US officials introduced the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC) to expand government control over the countryside, improve efforts to encourage enemy defections, and disrupt

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<sup>44</sup> U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record* [Hereafter, *CR*], 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1969. Vol. 115, pt. 12, H: 15380-15381; Memorandum of Conversation, 30 July 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 324 (Document 103); Embtel 18304, 9 September 1969, Box 75, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Continuing Problems with Land Reform in Vietnam, 26 September 1969, Box 75, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Continuing Problems with Land Reform in Vietnam, 26 September 1969, Box 75, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 20975, 18 October 1969, Box 139, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from William Sullivan to the Secretary of State: Presidential Letter on Land Reform in Vietnam, 6 October 1969, Box 75, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

the NLF. Although hesitant at first, Thieu eventually adopted the plan as his own and strove to make it more practical. The American officials in charge of pacification were Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) Directors Robert Komer (1967-1968) and William Colby (1968-1971). They originally suspected Thieu was trying to derail the APC by changing the labels used to identify security levels in various regions. Thieu did not want official reports to indicate that a South Vietnamese village was “contested” or controlled by the NLF. Labels like that would undermine the Thieu regime’s legitimacy at the peace table, because they indicated that Saigon could not control its own territory. Komer and Colby originally interpreted Thieu’s revised labels as evidence that Saigon would not prioritize pacification. Once they realized that Thieu was only trying to protect his negotiating position, the CORDS directors felt reassured.<sup>45</sup>

At the beginning of 1969, US officials believed that pacification needed a major overhaul. The CIA reported that South Vietnamese government forces had successfully penetrated the countryside in previous years, but were unable to guarantee across-the-board security. While the Agency found Thieu’s election in 1967 promising, the contest was so fraught with irregularities that it was impossible to judge the true allegiance of the South Vietnamese people.<sup>46</sup> A strong pacification campaign could help improve Saigon’s control over the countryside.

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<sup>45</sup> Colby with McCargar, *Lost Victory*, 254-256, 263; Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 257, 285-286.

<sup>46</sup> Special National Intelligence Estimate, 16 January 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 1-2 (Document 1). The CIA was slightly more optimistic in tone, if not in content in Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, 24 January 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 12-14 (Document 6). For a discussion of the 1967 South Vietnamese presidential election, see Chapter 1.

The Nixon administration believed that the pacification program needed improved leadership. The State Department alleged that the South Vietnamese program to attract NLF defectors (Chieu Hoi) had fallen to the wayside because of a leadership deficit, but there were other reasons for the program's ineffectiveness. Few of the defectors were senior enemy officials, and corruption hindered the program's effectiveness. The Chieu Hoi center at Bao Trai, for example, exaggerated the number of defectors it held in order to justify a higher budget. In addition, some junior enemy cadres may have used the program to secure breaks from the war, and to acquire the food, medical care, and economic assistance granted to defectors. Upon release from Chieu Hoi facilities, these "defectors" could return to their NLF units. According to a State Department official and the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, defection rates increased during the APC as a result of the greater attention Thieu paid to the program. Defection rates continued to rise dramatically in the summer of 1969, but declined in later years when both American and South Vietnamese attention shifted away from pacification.<sup>47</sup>

Planning for a renewed pacification effort began in late January and early February, when Thieu made several critical decisions. First, since the NLF controlled some regions, Thieu called for continued expansion of the government security umbrella to the rest of South Vietnam. Second, he sought to address the leadership problem by appointing a new Minister for Revolutionary Development and creating the new position

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<sup>47</sup> Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, 25 January 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 23-41 (Document 10); Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 143-144, 225, 249, 308; Tal Tovy, "Learning from the Past for Present Counterinsurgency Conflicts: The Chieu Hoi Program as a Case Study," *Armed Forces & Society* 38, no. 1 (January 2012): 142-163; Ky with Wolf, *Buddha's Child*, 155-157.

of Deputy Prime Minister for Pacification. Third, Thieu promised to promote a new APC to prevent the enemy from returning to regions from which they had been expelled by allied forces. Finally, Thieu envisioned a program to encourage local communities to take responsibility for their own security, by whatever means they deemed necessary.<sup>48</sup>

American officials praised Thieu's pacification plans and the initial results of this revitalized campaign. Laird commented that the energy and determination with which Thieu approached pacification was admirable. Bunker reported that Kissinger's earlier concerns about Chieu Hoi were being addressed, and weekly defections increased. In addition, roughly 400 members of the NLF were eliminated each week under the Phoenix Program, a covert campaign to neutralize the NLF by arresting or killing insurgents. Bunker also claimed that between 3,500 and 5,000 other enemies were killed weekly through military operations. Bunker's claims may have been exaggerated. Some historians claim that Phoenix was a great success, while others argue that targets were poorly chosen and that South Vietnam's systemic corruption and overburdened judicial system hampered the covert operation. The ambassador nonetheless took these numbers as evidence that Thieu served as an effective leader for the pacification campaign.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Implementation of the 1969 PD Plan, 21 February 1969, Box 62, Folder 3, NSCF, VSF, RNLN; Embtel 5423, 21 March 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLN.

<sup>49</sup> Backchannel Message from the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 21 May 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 223-225 (Document 70); Meeting of Secretary of Defense with President Thieu, 8 March 1969, Box 70, Folder 13, NSCF, VSF, RNLN. For evaluations of the Phoenix program, see Hunt, *Pacification*, 276-277; Dale Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnamese War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), 13; Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 245-247; Richard Schultz, "Breaking the Will of the Enemy during the Vietnam War: The

Thieu was apparently moving with vigor and energy, but the Nixon administration was divided over the results. According to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV); Embassy Saigon; the commander-in-chief, US Pacific Command; and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), pacification efforts between 1961 and 1968 had led to dramatic improvements in security. By contrast, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the CIA believed that Thieu's reported 1968 APC achievements could not be trusted. The critics claimed that Saigon enjoyed no more popular support than it did after the 1968 Tet Offensive. They further argued that pacification gains from the APC were only achieved by spreading South Vietnamese security forces thinly across contested regions. The NLF could therefore easily return to communities from which they had been expelled.<sup>50</sup>

In June, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Robert Keatley suggested that the NLF had redirected its focus from the rural insurgency to attacking American military bases. The change in enemy strategy, Keatley argued, created the illusion of progress. The reduction

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Operationalization of the Cost-Benefit Model of Counterinsurgency Warfare," *Journal of Peace Research* XV, no. 2 (1978): 109-129, p. 120-121; Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 397-398; William Rosenau and Austin Long, *The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009); Charles Neu, *America's Lost War: Vietnam: 1945-1975* (Wheeling, Ill: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2005), 176-177, 215; Justin Wintle, *The Vietnam Wars* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 163-164; Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program* (New York: Morrow, 1990); James Gibson, *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 208-305; Thomas C. Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (London: Westview Press, 1985), 208-212.

<sup>50</sup> Summary of the Interagency Response to NSSM 1, 22 March 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 129-152 (Document 44). See also chapter 1 for information on Thieu's first APC.

in violence against South Vietnamese targets did not indicate that the pacification campaign had been successful, because violence in other areas spiked. Bunker was not convinced by such criticism, and argued that Thieu's close supervision of pacification had improved the program. Thieu made four tours of the corps regions in the first half of 1969 to review progress, inspire his subordinates, and demand better performance. The president had originally set a year-end goal for his security forces of controlling ninety percent of the South Vietnamese population. Within a few months of opening the new campaign, however, he was confident that this goal could be achieved by October 31.<sup>51</sup>

Despite the ambassador's optimism, Kissinger nonetheless told Nixon on September 11 that pacification was faltering. The US national security adviser tried to protect Thieu's reputation from suffering for the bad news by noting that Thieu led the most stable government since the Diem era. By framing his analysis in those terms, Kissinger contributed to the pro-Thieu mentality that pervaded the White House in 1969. Thieu did not need to succeed at pacification because he could earn Kissinger's goodwill just by making an effort.<sup>52</sup>

Thieu spent the last two months of the year working to complete the 1969 program and prepare for the 1970 pacification effort. On November 16, Thieu told Bunker he wanted to train the People's Self Defense Force (PSDF) in civics and psychological warfare. Bunker agreed, noting that pacification gains could support efforts

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Keatley, "U.S. to Pull 25,000 from Vietnam; Nixon, Thieu Optimistic at Midway," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 June 1969; Embtel 14317, 16 July 1969, Box 75, Folder 8, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 11 September 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 376-390 (Document 119).



to mobilize popular support for the government in Saigon. At the end of 1969, Thieu again toured the four corps regions to consult his subordinates and sent teams from the Ministry of Revolutionary Development to inspire low-ranking Vietnamese officials to embrace pacification.<sup>53</sup>

Bunker acknowledged that pacification gains were in no small part due to the enemy's decision to preserve its strength. The increasing tempo of attacks on the PSDF and Popular Force (PF) militia units indicated that this trend was changing, but Bunker claimed these forces were performing well. The PSDF grew to three million organized members, half again the stated goal from the beginning of the year. Although Phung Hoang, the South Vietnamese counterpart to the Phoenix Program, was less successful than other initiatives, Bunker argued that it yielded favorable results in the last quarter of the year. Finally, approximately 1,000 NLF supporters allegedly defected every week under Chieu Hoi.<sup>54</sup>

While Thieu impressed American officials with his leadership, both ARVN and US forces failed to rally local communities to Thieu's banner, so as to deny the NLF popular support. Thieu did not conduct significant goodwill operations to earn the loyalty of the South Vietnamese, and repression and government corruption further alienated peasants in the countryside. South Vietnamese officials also failed to produce reliable

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<sup>53</sup> Embtel 22933, 16 November 1969, Box 140, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 24914, 19 December 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>54</sup> Embtel 24914, 19 December 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

pacification reports, and refused to use American surveys to gauge popular support.<sup>55</sup> In truth, the 1969 pacification campaign yielded ambiguous results at best.

If there were some shortcomings in the pacification effort, however, the Nixon administration did not hold Thieu accountable. American officials, particularly Ambassador Bunker, routinely praised Thieu for exerting passionate and rigorous leadership. Since the South Vietnamese president had done all that could be expected of him, the White House relegated blame to lower echelons of the South Vietnamese government. The 1969 pacification campaign therefore gave the Nixon administration one more reason to treat Thieu as an exceptionally competent leader in South Vietnam.

Thieu's failure to promote a viable peace proposal in 1969 did not damage his reputation in the White House, either. The Nixon administration believed that Thieu was the only leader in South Vietnam with a rational perspective on peace negotiations. The White House and Embassy Saigon concluded that Thieu was trying to cooperate, as he had with the land reform and pacification initiatives, but that his people prevented him from presenting a viable peace plan. Thieu was not as open to a political settlement with Hanoi and the NLF as the Nixon administration believed, as he demonstrated in later years. In the early stages of the war, however, the White House believed Thieu was trying to negotiate in good faith over the protests of his people, who allegedly feared peace.

Nixon did not articulate a specific peace proposal until his speech of 14 May 1969. He offered the following provisions for a settlement with Hanoi and the NLF: the

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<sup>55</sup> Embtel 24914, 19 December 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Hunt, *Pacification*, 205-207, 275-277; Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 241-308; Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes*, 13; Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 170-172.

simultaneous withdrawal of all non-South Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam within a twelve-month period; the participation of all elements of South Vietnamese society in the national government, which could take any form the people wished; American openness to the neutralization of South Vietnam, so it would not take sides in the Cold War; US acceptance of reunification with the North after five years, if the South Vietnamese desired it; and an American promise not to maintain military bases in the South. In his memoirs, Kissinger wrote that Thieu only cooperated in the early stages of Nixon's peace efforts because he did not believe the communists were ready to stop fighting. According to Kissinger, Thieu did not actually agree with the US negotiating position, but failed to inform the White House of his reservations. In fairness, though, the American negotiating strategy changed as the war progressed, and Kissinger failed to keep Saigon informed of developments in the peace negotiations from which Thieu was excluded.<sup>56</sup> In 1969, however, Nixon clung to Thieu as the kind of leader who might drag an irrational South Vietnamese rabble into a reasonable peace settlement.

The Nixon administration initially approached peace negotiations with more sympathy for the South Vietnamese than the Johnson administration had demonstrated. Kissinger argued that suspicions between Washington and Saigon—aside from whatever complications might have arisen from the Anna Chennault Affair—hampered the Johnson-era negotiations. Thieu's alarm in 1968 about portraying the NLF as the

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<sup>56</sup> Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," May 14, 1969, published online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California (www.presidency.ucsb.edu), © 1999-2011; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 447; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 43-44. For the changing US negotiating strategy, see Chapters 3 and 4.

government's equal had not been trivial. Kissinger claimed that the Johnson White House did not understand the South Vietnamese perspective. Nixon's national security adviser also believed that differences between Vietnamese and American culture slowed the peace process. In an article for *Foreign Affairs*, he claimed that historical conflicts with stronger powers transformed the Vietnamese into a devious people. Kissinger wrote that the Vietnamese style of communication was indirect, designed to minimize embarrassment, while Americans were honest and straightforward. These differences of style complicated discussions between Washington and Hanoi. While Kissinger was describing his enemy, however, he wrote about a perceived "Vietnamese style," not a "North Vietnamese style." As far as he was concerned, all Vietnamese—enemies and allies alike—were devious. Indeed, Kissinger later accused Thieu, specifically, of deviousness.<sup>57</sup>

Thieu seemed to offer a way out of the quagmire. The CIA reported that Thieu and certain other, unnamed South Vietnamese leaders were intellectually superior to their countrymen. These leaders, according to the Agency, had previously been forced to resist American demands for political concessions—and would no doubt need to do so again—because they would look like American puppets if they compromised too quickly. So long as the pace of negotiations was gradual, though, the CIA believed that Thieu could work toward a reasonable peace settlement. The White House thus ignored signs that Thieu disliked its negotiating positions. Nixon needed Thieu to be more flexible when the right

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<sup>57</sup> Henry Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* 47, no. 2 (January 1969): 211-234, p. 211, 218, 220; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: The Recent Flare-Up Between President Thieu and Vice President Ky, 24 August 1970, Box 148, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLN.

opportunity arose, but the premise of the CIA report structured Washington's analysis of the South Vietnamese president's behavior during the years-long peace process. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib even suggested that Thieu had liked the 1968 draft agreement that Lyndon Johnson had promoted, but was forced to reject it because nobody else in South Vietnam understood it.<sup>58</sup>

Thieu tried his best to reinforce these impressions in Washington. He explored plans to strengthen the government and ARVN so they could meet the challenges of a postwar political contest with the NLF. He wanted to reorganize the civil service and his Cabinet to improve governance, and provide better training and equipment for his armed forces. If he accomplished these tasks, he would be ready to face the NLF when it was incorporated into the South Vietnamese state after the war. Thieu also took credit for removing a stigma against open discussions of a political settlement in South Vietnam. Bunker claimed the South Vietnamese had not previously felt comfortable with frank conversations on this issue. To further demonstrate that he would speak with the enemy in good faith, Thieu authorized his representatives in Paris to negotiate with Hanoi and the NLF, and publicly promised not to halt negotiations if the enemy was not immediately forthcoming. Finally, when NLF forces shelled Saigon in early 1969, in violation of a ceasefire, Thieu avoided asking the White House to retaliate. Bunker reported that Thieu faced significant domestic political pressures to respond to the attacks in kind, but he

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<sup>58</sup> The Situation in Vietnam: Overview and Outlook, 24 January 1969, Box 63, Folder 1, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, 25 January 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, VI: 23-41 (Document 10).

knew the White House was not yet ready for such action. Thieu therefore exercised restraint in order to avoid opening a new rift in the alliance.<sup>59</sup>

A bombing campaign dubbed Operation Menu was designed, in part, to console Thieu after enemy forces began shelling Saigon on 22 February 1969. The White House hoped that Menu would make Thieu more amenable to peace negotiations, though Kissinger warned Nixon against publicly identifying Menu as an “appropriate response” to the Communist offensive. Nonetheless, the White House asked Thieu to pursue a viable peace settlement in Paris after the bombing campaign in Cambodia started on March 18; the causal link between the Communist attacks and American bombing campaign was clear. As Kissinger predicted, Thieu became more cooperative when US forces initiated Menu. He now said he could accept NLF participation in postwar elections if: 1) the NLF did not refer to itself as a communist party, which would be illegal under the South Vietnamese constitution; 2) the NLF ceased all acts of violence and terrorism; and 3) the insurgents did not receive foreign support for their party. Operation Menu had apparently boosted Thieu’s confidence.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Memorandum for the Record: Remarks Made by President Nguyen Van Thieu on the Paris Peace Talks, Political Problems in South Viet-Nam Resulting From a Ceasefire, Government Reorganization, Pacification Program, GVN Contacts with the Other Side at Paris and Troop Withdrawals, 18 January 1969, “GVN Private Position, 1969,” Box 26, Lot 76D431, Record Group [Hereafter RG] 59, National Archives and Records Administration [Hereafter NARA]; “Thieu Says Regime Won’t Quit Paris Talks Before a Settlement,” *New York Times*, 7 February 1969; Embtel 4198, 5 March 1969, Box 136, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 4328, 6 March 1969, Box 136, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Meeting of Secretary of Defense with President Thieu, 8 March 1969, Box 70, Folder 13, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>60</sup> Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 16 March 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, VI: 121-123 (Document 40); Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 119; Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 133-

Thieu's assent to a peace agreement depended on South Vietnam's internal strength and international guarantees against postwar North Vietnamese reprisals. As a show of good faith, he announced his willingness to negotiate with the NLF. Rogers told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Thieu's statement marked him as a great statesman. Hanoi, however, had its own ideas about how negotiations should progress. On May 31, North Vietnam's chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho, proposed bilateral negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., Nixon's delegate to the talks until November 1969, recommended that Nixon accept bilateral talks. To avoid serious fallout with America's allies, the White House would need to consult Saigon before and after every session of these negotiations. To further placate Thieu, Lodge urged the White House to publicly denounce the NLF's rejection of Thieu's offer of private negotiations.<sup>61</sup>

Since Saigon was worried about the bilateral negotiations, the Nixon administration tried to use the Midway Summit to restore Thieu's confidence in American support. On June 4, Kissinger told Nixon that Thieu was sincerely working toward a peace agreement. Thieu's support for Vietnamization; the public statements in which he

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137; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 239; Memorandum of Conversation between William Sullivan and Nguyen Van Thieu, 20 March 1969, "GVN Private Position, 1969," Box 26, Lot 74D431, RG 59, NARA. Article IV of the South Vietnamese Constitution, which bans Communist political parties, is quoted in: Speech by Jacob Javits, 8 May 1969, Box 137, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>61</sup>Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Discussions between Ambassador Bunker and President Thieu in Saigon, 25 March 1969, Box 78, Folder 7, NSCF, VSF, RNLM, Memorandum 1 of 3; *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1969. Vol. 115, pt. 6, S: 7634; Embtel 5845, 27 March 1969, Box 136, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, 1 June 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, VI: 232-236 (Document 75).

demonstrated flexibility toward negotiations; his private assurances to Washington that Saigon would continue to cooperate on peace issues; and his efforts to unite non-communist political factions under the government's banner all indicated that he was cooperating with his allies. Kissinger advised Nixon to reassure Thieu at Midway that the United States would not impose a coalition government on Saigon or leave North Vietnamese soldiers that traveled south during military operations to remain within South Vietnamese borders.<sup>62</sup>

Three days before the Summit, Secretary Rogers criticized the NLF for turning down Thieu's offer of private negotiations. Rogers told the press that Thieu was particularly flexible in regard to postwar elections established by a peace agreement, wherein South Vietnamese citizens from both sides of the conflict could participate in the democratic process. Although no elections were scheduled in South Vietnam before 1971, Thieu had accepted Nixon's statement on May 14 that the South Vietnamese must determine the fate of their own country. Thieu also promised that anyone who renounced violence would be allowed to vote or run as a candidate.<sup>63</sup>

There were major obstacles to full NLF participation in the South Vietnamese state, but Thieu promised before and during the Midway Summit that such problems could be resolved. Thieu assumed that whatever peace settlement the warring parties reached would include provisions for postwar elections in which the NLF could

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<sup>62</sup> Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 4 June 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 243-246 (Document 79).

<sup>63</sup> Secretary Rogers' News Conference, 5 June 1969, Box 71, Folder 6, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.



participate. He admitted privately that he would need to modify the South Vietnamese constitution in order to accommodate such elections, even though that might be a difficult task. Thieu claimed that he could not endorse such changes publicly until the other side compromised its hard-line stance at the peace table as well. He also told US officials that he was willing to allow the NLF to participate as a political party and would accept 10,000 international supervisors to prevent election fraud. On his way home from the Midway Summit, he warned the South Vietnamese not to advocate for a coalition government or unilateral US troop withdrawals. Still, Thieu said he was willing negotiate with Hanoi on any issue.<sup>64</sup>

Nixon was content with the meeting at Midway, but Thieu was not really satisfied with the US agenda or the way he was treated during the summit. The South Vietnamese leader suffered a long list of grievances. Nixon and Kissinger took large chairs, while Thieu was given a smaller one. Furious at the implication that the Americans were more prestigious than him, Thieu marched into the dining room and returned with another large chair. Nixon and Kissinger also asked Thieu to answer questions in English, without warning, and gave him English versions of negotiations documents. Thieu had some English language skills, but he could not consider legal nuances without Vietnamese texts. He also had substantive reservations about Nixon's positions. He had only reluctantly agreed to bilateral talks between North Vietnam and the United States, because he was denied a voice in negotiations over the future of his country. He further

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<sup>64</sup> Ambassador Bunker's 79<sup>th</sup> Message to the President, 5 June 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Memorandum of a Conversation, 8 June 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 248-252 (Document 81); Embtel 11583, 9 June 1969, Box 71, Folder 7, RNLM.

believed Nixon's May 14 proposal for all non-South Vietnamese forces to withdraw over a twelve-month period represented a reversal of Johnson's pledge at Manila to keep a small force in the South for six months after the North Vietnamese withdrew.<sup>65</sup> William Colby later described the administration's treatment of Thieu as "petty and denigrating."<sup>66</sup>

To maintain the façade of unity, Thieu agreed to publicize his position on a negotiated settlement. On July 11, he offered a new peace proposal, which included provisions for a general election, a mixed electoral commission that included the NLF, and international supervision of the election. The White House welcomed the offer. Nixon's press statement was generous: "President Thieu has put forward a comprehensive, statesman-like and eminently fair proposal for a political settlement in South Vietnam. It deserves the support of all who seek peace in that tortured land."<sup>67</sup>

While the July 11 speech earned Thieu some praise in the White House, it caused the South Vietnamese leader trouble in Saigon. Some critics believed that the White House pressured him into making his offer. Others worried that the highly organized NLF would win early elections. Still others were concerned about the constitutional ban on communist participation in South Vietnamese politics. A State Department memo alleged that Thieu failed to consult a single politician in South Vietnam before announcing his proposal, so nobody else supported it. Fortunately for Thieu, the enemy rejected his offer and some of his critics understood the pressures he faced from Washington. Many of the

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<sup>65</sup> Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 32-34; Colby with McCargar, *Lost Victory*, 339; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 107, 149-150.

<sup>66</sup> Colby with McCargar, *Lost Victory*, 339.

<sup>67</sup> Statement by the President on President Thieu's Speech of July 11, 11 July 1969, Box 69, Folder 9, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 18-19.

proposal's harshest critics also stayed silent because they sought political offices for which they would need Thieu's favor.<sup>68</sup>

Nixon visited Saigon in July, and promised Thieu that Washington would not demand further concessions from Saigon until the North Vietnamese compromised as well. "We can't have you nibbled away," Nixon said. "That is something that we are not willing to permit."<sup>69</sup> American officials maintained that position for the rest of the year. The White House was wary of creating further political problems for Thieu by demanding more concessions. Indeed, Thieu's public statements in October were belligerent, indicating that he still needed to manage the backlash from his July 11 proposal. He said the present South Vietnamese government had been elected by the people, and should not be eliminated after a peace agreement. The NLF should not be treated, he insisted, as the government's equal. Thieu later toned down his rhetoric, and thus avoided raising serious concerns about his suitability as a negotiating partner in the White House. Nixon rewarded Thieu in his "Silent Majority" speech the next month by making no mention of negotiations and by publicly denying that Saigon was an obstacle to peace.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Briefing for President: The Negotiations After Thieu's July 11 Speech, 29 July 1969, "GVN Private Position, 1969," Box 26, RG 59, NARA.

<sup>69</sup> Memorandum of Conversation: Saigon, Independence Palace, 30 July 1969, 1 August 1969, Box 138, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLN.

<sup>70</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 10 September 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 370-374 (Document 117); Minutes of NSC Meeting, 12 September 1969, Box H-109, Folder 4, National Security Council Institutional ("H") Files [Hereafter NSCIF], Minutes of Meetings (1969-1974), NSC Meeting Minutes [Hereafter NSCMM], RNLN; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Henry Kissinger: Appointment with Ambassador Bunker, 3 October 1969, Box 78, Folder 7, NSCF, VSF, RNLN; "World: A Sigh of Relief in Saigon," *Time*, 14 November 1969; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 59; Embtel 20194, 7 October 1969, Box 139, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLN; Memorandum from

There was little progress in the Paris peace negotiations in 1969, and US officials concluded that most South Vietnamese were unprepared for a settlement. The Nixon administration was convinced that Thieu was approaching the peace process with rational pragmatism, however, and that he would eventually bring his woefully skittish countrymen in the right direction. As with the South Vietnamese land reform and pacification campaigns, Thieu's approach to peace talks protected him from negative American appraisals of the Vietnamese. His friendly cooperation made up, at least in part, for his failure to achieve a settlement.

#### **WORKING AT ODDS: THIEU'S RESISTANCE TO NATION BUILDING**

In most cases, Thieu convinced the Nixon administration that he was an exceptionally competent, pragmatic, and effective leader. He stood out in American minds from the rest of South Vietnamese society, which US officials condemned as fractious, venal, and irrational. Thieu cooperated with the White House only on those policy initiatives that he considered important and those for which Nixon and Kissinger demanded compliance. When those two conditions were not met, a project failed. Consequently, Thieu successfully obstructed the nation-building projects advocated by both Bunker and the State Department, especially their initiatives to forge a new non-communist alliance called Lien Minh and to make the Thieu's Cabinet more representative of South Vietnamese society.

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Kissinger to Nixon: Ambassador Bunker's Assessment of the Vietnam Situation, 30 October 1969, Box 78, Folder 7, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 102.

The White House eliminated most of the US nation-building programs in South Vietnam over the course of the war. The Nixon Doctrine, which stated that Washington would support its allies with foreign aid instead of direct combat interventions, did not leave much room for the Johnson era's grandiose projects. The Nixon Doctrine thus contributed directly to Thieu's evolving authoritarian state, as Saigon was forced to rely increasingly on the military and centralized state power.<sup>71</sup> Nixon allowed the State Department and Embassy Saigon to promote those projects in 1969, but he was not particularly exercised when they failed. To the president, it was not shocking that the fractious Vietnamese were still squabbling amongst themselves. The US president's attitude protected Thieu's reputation in the White House, despite the conflict with Bunker and the State Department.

The Johnson administration had been disappointed with Thieu and Ky's inability to rally broad public support.<sup>72</sup> In mid-1968, however, Thieu created a new institution to mobilize the South Vietnamese. The National Alliance for Social Revolution, or Lien Minh, was supposed to be a broad coalition of non-communist political parties that would cooperate on some policies. The members of Lien Minh were also dedicated to working together against the NLF, in the event that the insurgents were incorporated into the state as a result of peace negotiations. Lien Minh lasted less than a year. While the alliance successfully implemented some social welfare projects, it never attracted national

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<sup>71</sup> Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 142; McMahon, *The Limits of Empire*, 157; Mark T. Berger, "The Rise and Demise of National Development and the Origins of Post-Cold War Capitalism," *Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 2 (2001): 211-234, p. 229; Linantud, "Pressure and Protection," 647; John Prados, *Lost Crusader: The Secret Wars of CIA Director William Colby* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 229-233.

<sup>72</sup> See Chapter 1.

attention. Ambassador Bunker believed, however, that the organization still had potential. The US government secretly financed Lien Minh, and Bunker recommended that the Nixon administration continue such aid so long as Thieu personally led the alliance and devoted South Vietnamese funds to the program. Thieu was reluctant to associate too closely with Lien Minh, lest he remind his people of Ngo Dinh Diem's Can Lao Party, which facilitated the old dictatorship. The current Lien Minh leadership proved ineffective, however, so Thieu promised to invest his personal prestige in the project.<sup>73</sup>

Thieu singularly failed to make any progress on political mobilization in 1969. In his memoirs, Kissinger claimed that South Vietnam was more stable in early 1969 than in previous years. Thieu, a Northerner, included in his government several nationalists from the South to broaden the political base of his regime, including Prime Minister Tran Van Huong.<sup>74</sup> Writing in 1979, Kissinger ignored the considerable concerns that Bunker and the CIA had expressed about Thieu's inability to unite non-communists during the first year of the Nixon Administration.

On January 24, CIA chief Richard Helms reported to Kissinger that Saigon had weathered the Tet Offensive well, and that political elites now understood the need to unite against the enemy. While the Thieu-Ky rivalry that began in 1965 remained a nuisance, Thieu had the upper hand. Unfortunately, he had been unable to convince the

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<sup>73</sup> Telegram From the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker) to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) and Secretary of State Rusk, 15 July 1968, *FRUS*, January-August 1968, Vol. VI: Online (Document 298); Backchannel Message From the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker) to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson), 7 February 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 61-64 (Document 19); Meeting of Secretary of Defense with President Thieu, 8 March 1969, Box 70, Folder 13, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>74</sup> Kissinger, *White House Years*, 236.

public that he was a true national leader, and Lien Minh remained ineffective. The CIA blamed the South Vietnamese public, which restricted Thieu's ability to accept American ideas. According to the Agency, the South Vietnamese public worried that the United States would sell out Saigon in the peace negotiations. Thieu thus needed to resist some American advice, even when he wanted to cooperate, or he would look like a puppet controlled by foreigners.<sup>75</sup>

Bunker concurred with the CIA, noting that there were more restrictions on the Thieu regime than on the military dictatorships that preceded it. The National Assembly and public monitored the government closely, and Thieu had to consult an expanded national security council—including key military officers, his Cabinet, and leaders of both houses of the National Assembly—when he made decisions. Bunker wrote, “We may regard this a sign of weakness and may feel that he should exert more leadership; but we are not likely to change the basic character of Thieu who by and large is the best and most widely accepted leader his country has had in ten years.... and in any case he lacks the political power to move by fiat.”<sup>76</sup> The new restrictions on this more democratic Republic of Vietnam made political mobilization an even higher priority for Bunker, who sought to preserve Thieu's efficacy as a leader.

In March, Thieu proposed to expand Lien Minh by absorbing more political parties into the alliance. Negotiations with the leaders of those parties were already underway. Thieu intended to take on a personal leadership role in Lien Minh, and

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<sup>75</sup> The Situation in Vietnam: Overview and Outlook, 24 January 1969, Box 63, Folder 1, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>76</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 24 January 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 14-17 (Document 7).

expected he would be elected leader at a national conference that Bunker described as “a peculiarly Vietnamese combination of a convention and a training and indoctrination program.”<sup>77</sup> The South Vietnamese president also explained to Bunker that he planned to use public resources to rally the masses for a non-communist social revolution by deploying the PSDF, pacification teams, and Regional and Popular Forces. Thieu envisioned sending new groups of technical and information cadres to explain national policies to local communities and help run village governments. Thieu’s plans suffered from a fatal weakness, though. Much like Nixon, he relied on a narrow circle of officials to govern. Although he was willing to send envoys to rally the masses, he refused to reach out to his non-communist political opponents.<sup>78</sup> Thieu therefore ignored many of the people who could have helped him broaden his base of support.

Still, Bunker was greatly impressed with Thieu’s plans, and Kissinger framed his report to Nixon in cautiously optimistic terms. While Thieu was moving slowly with Lien Minh, the national security adviser wrote, some progress had been made and greater efforts were on the way. Kissinger and Nixon both signed off on further covert assistance for Lien Minh, but the money was not enough to convince Thieu to reach out to opposition elements. In fact, several of the political factions that Thieu was hoping to recruit failed to appear at Lien Minh’s first meeting.<sup>79</sup> Bunker nonetheless reported that

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<sup>77</sup> Embtel 4199, 5 March 1969, Box 136, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between Ambassador Bunker, Deputy Ambassador Berger, and President Thieu – President Thieu’s Political Plans, 25 March 1969, Box 78, Folder 7, NSCF, VSF, RNLM, Memorandum 3 of 3.

<sup>79</sup> Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Discussions between Ambassador Bunker and President Thieu in Saigon, March 21, 25 March 1969, Box 78, Folder 7, NSCF, VSF, RNLM, Memorandum 1 of 3; Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National



Thieu's effort, "the most important political event" of the month, indicated that the president was making progress.<sup>80</sup>

Eventually, Thieu decided to abandon Lien Minh altogether. On May 25, he took control of the National Social Democratic Front (NSDF), a new organization comprised chiefly of conservative hawks. The *New York Times* explained the restricted membership by suggesting that other South Vietnamese politicians refused to join unless they were offered bribes or special privileges. Despite the failure of Lien Minh, NSC staffer Morton Halperin sent Kissinger a memo with praise for Thieu's efforts at political mobilization.<sup>81</sup>

Bunker tried one last time to get Thieu to appeal to opposition politicians, but the South Vietnamese president resisted. In July, Bunker suggested that Thieu should invite Senators Tran Van Don and Dang Van Sung into the NSDF. Both men complained to the embassy that they had not been asked to participate in the national unity effort. Bunker told Thieu, patronizingly, that, "Sung had told us he felt like a maiden who wants to get married but needs to be asked."<sup>82</sup> Thieu promised to find a place for Sung's parliamentary group, but would have nothing to do with Don, who was campaigning to replace Thieu with General Duong Van "Big" Minh, the man who succeeded Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

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Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 27 March 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 161-163 (Document 47); Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: John Burke's Saigon Impressions, 14 April 1969, Box 136, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from Dean Moor to Kissinger: Review of the Current Vietnam Situation, 29 April 1969, Box 137, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Joseph Treaster, "Thieu Grapples with Two-Party Nettle," *New York Times*, 4 May 1969,

<sup>80</sup> Embtel 8757, 6 May 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM,

<sup>81</sup> Terence Smith, "Thieu Takes Helm of Political Body to Counter Reds," *New York Times*, 26 May 1969; Memorandum from Morton Halperin to Kissinger: Vietnam Policy Alternatives, 3 July 1969, Box 138, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 14317, 16 July 1969, Box 75, Folder 8, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>82</sup> Embtel 13466, 4 July 1969, Box 138, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

So ended the last real effort to create a South Vietnamese political front in 1969. On Christmas Eve, Deputy Ambassador Samuel Berger reported that Thieu had become disenchanted with Lien Minh. He encouraged its members to join the NSDF, but the new organization was no better than its predecessor.<sup>83</sup>

Bunker and the State Department grew frustrated with Thieu's lack of energy in the political mobilization project, and his refusal to include non-communist political opponents in Lien Minh and the NSDF. Without Nixon and Kissinger's support, however, Bunker lacked the leverage he needed to force Thieu's hand. The White House thought the South Vietnamese were irrationally fractious. Kissinger later wrote that he did not blame Thieu for his inability to unite the South Vietnamese because he went to "extraordinary" lengths to broaden his political base.<sup>84</sup> If Thieu did not go far enough, Kissinger believed he understood the South Vietnamese president's hesitance to engage his opposition. Writing in his memoirs about the peace process, Kissinger claimed, "Like all Vietnamese, [Thieu] could not see how power might be shared."<sup>85</sup> Thieu might have been a South Vietnamese superman, in other words, but Kissinger did not expect him to completely transcend the limitations of his race. The South Vietnamese president thus obstructed a US-inspired nation-building project without alienating his allies.

While Thieu's grassroots movement faltered, new conflicts brewed in elite circles. On February 6, Bunker reported that Thieu was contemplating changes to his Cabinet. The embassy was not unjustified in its concerns that such moves would create instability

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<sup>83</sup> Embtel 25133, 24 December 1969, Box 141, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLN

<sup>84</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 96.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 178.

in South Vietnam, given that Nguyen Cao Ky's firing of General Nguyen Chanh Thi had triggered the 1966 Buddhist Crisis. Bunker advised the State Department to stress the continuity of the Prime Minister Tran Van Huong's government in press backgrounders. While South Vietnam's pernicious regionalism was a nuisance, Bunker wrote that Thieu would not appoint too many Northerners to the Cabinet and that Huong offered a guarantee of regional diversity.<sup>86</sup> Over the next few months, the ambassador lobbied Thieu to build a more representative Cabinet that could supplement Lien Minh's efforts to rally the public to Saigon's banner. Since neither Nixon nor Kissinger wanted to intervene in South Vietnamese domestic politics, however, Thieu was able to resist the ambassador's entreaties. Saigon ended up with an even less representative Cabinet than before. Vice President Ky also convinced the White House that other South Vietnamese politicians were immature, which made Thieu's actions seem more palatable. Reluctantly, Bunker endorsed Thieu's decisions.

After hearing of Thieu's intention to modify his Cabinet in early 1969, Bunker sought an opportunity to consult Thieu. On February 7, the ambassador asked for advance notice about the shake-up so Washington could dispel rumors about Thieu forming a "peace Cabinet" to appease the communists. Thieu was amused by the outlandish excuse, but agreed to give Bunker fair warning.<sup>87</sup> The South Vietnamese president was thinking about allowing Interior Minister Tran Thien Khiem to simultaneously hold the office of Deputy Prime Minister of Revolutionary Development. This would put Khiem in charge

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<sup>86</sup> Embtel 2453, 6 February 1969, Box 62, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM. For more information on the 1966 Buddhist Crisis, see Chapter 1.

<sup>87</sup> Embtel 2606, 8 February 1969, Box 62, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

of pacification, which was currently part of Huong's portfolio. Thieu thought the prime minister had too many responsibilities. Saigon announced Khiem's promotion on March 12, as well as several lesser Cabinet changes. Designed to improve policy implementation, the shake-up did little to broaden Thieu's political base. Bunker focused on positive developments, though, noting that several priority projects benefitted from new leadership.<sup>88</sup>

The next month, rumors swirled that Saigon's base of support might actually be narrowed. Thieu and Huong were at odds and the latter's health was declining. One US official predicted that Thieu would search for a replacement. Huong, considered one of the few incorruptible politicians in the country, had an autocratic style and lethargy that made him unpopular in the National Assembly. Khiem was waiting in the wings. As a general, he was a controversial appointee, but he worked well with Thieu and was reportedly more aware of the need for grassroots reforms than any other Cabinet member. Expressing what was perhaps false regret, Thieu accepted Huong's resignation.<sup>89</sup>

As Khiem stepped into the prime minister's office, Thieu promised to renew his efforts to build national unity. He even invited his rival, "Big Minh," to join the government. Minh demurred, but agreed to offer advice whenever Thieu asked. While the invitation to a political opponent was a step forward for Thieu, the South Vietnamese

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<sup>88</sup> Embtel 3120, 15 February 1969, Box 62, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 3381, 22 February 1969, Box 75, Folder 8, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 4762, 12 March 1969, Box 136, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>89</sup> Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: John Burke's Saigon Impressions, 14 April 1969, Box 136, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 14317, 16 July 1969, Box 75, Folder 8, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 16990, 22 August 1969, Box 138, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

Cabinet remained socially homogenous and dominated by the military. The press and US congressional doves scoffed at the new government. This time, even the US National Security Council noticed that Bunker was spinning the news. Kissinger disliked the new Cabinet, too, but neither he nor President Nixon cared what Thieu did so long as South Vietnam remained stable as US forces withdrew.<sup>90</sup>

Another small, but troubling, challenge arose in the form of Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky. Thieu largely forced Ky into the background after the 1967 election, but their rivalry persisted. In February, Thieu even tried to replace Ky with Big Minh. For a while, the president and vice president worked together. Ky represented Saigon in meetings with Laird, Kissinger, and Nixon. In July, however, relations between Thieu and Ky cooled. During a meeting with Big Minh, Senator Tran Van Don, and twenty other generals, the vice president criticized Thieu's peace plans and boasted that he could take power by force. He expressed a similar sentiment during a speech at a war college.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Embtel 15091, 27 July 1969, Box 138, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 16381, 14 August 1969, Box 138, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 17064, 23 August 1969, Box 138, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Terence Smith, "Thieu's Disappointing New Cabinet," *New York Times*, 7 September 1969; "South Vietnam's Thieu Installs New Cabinet Characterized as Right-Wing, Conservative," *Wall Street Journal*, 2 September 1969; *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1969. Vol. 115, pt. 18, S: 24099-24103; Memorandum from Dean Moor to Kissinger: Assessment of New GVN Cabinet, 3 September 1969, Box 139, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 10 September 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 370-374 (Document 117); Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 11 September 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 376-390 (Document 119); Memorandum of Conversation, 17 October 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 460-466 (Document 137).

<sup>91</sup> Embtel 2606, 8 February 1969, Box 62, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; The Situation in Vietnam: Overview and Outlook, 24 January 1969, Box 63, Folder 1, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 2606, 8 February 1969, Box 62, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Meeting

Bunker described Ky's performance as "juvenile" and "outrageous," but he doubted that the vice president would actually lead a coup. Thieu was enraged, though, and confronted his rival directly. They avoided an open break for the moment, but Ky remained one of Thieu's toughest critics. While there was no real threat of a coup, this incident nonetheless demonstrated that the tensions between the South Vietnamese president and vice president were a potential source of instability, making it even more imperative for Washington to stand behind Thieu.<sup>92</sup>

In 1969, Ambassador Bunker and the State Department lobbied Thieu to create a more representative Cabinet to supplement the political mobilization campaign. Just as he derailed Lien Minh, however, Thieu resisted Bunker's advice on the structure of the South Vietnamese government. When he was done, Thieu had created a less representative, more hawkish—but potentially more effective—Cabinet. His feud with Vice President Ky remained an additional source of instability in elite South Vietnamese circles. Frustrated though he was, Bunker continued to send positive reports to Washington and even endorsed Thieu's Cabinet changes. Since Nixon and Kissinger were disinclined to intervene in South Vietnamese domestic politics, and Ky seemingly proved that other politicians in Saigon were immature, Thieu's reputation as an effective leader suffered very little.

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of Secretary of Defense with President Thieu, 8 March 1969, Box 70, Folder 13, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State, 2 March 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 84-86 (Document 28); Memorandum of Conversation, 4 May 1969, Box 136, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 17652, 30 August 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>92</sup> Embtel 15091, 27 July 1969, Box 138, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 15424, 31 July 1969, Box 138, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

## **RAPPROCHEMENT ACHIEVED**

In January 1969, Richard Nixon directed his administration to support Nguyen Van Thieu, stifling most criticism of the South Vietnamese president in the White House. The US president's order, combined with the Nixon administration's pervasive racism, facilitated support for a deeply unpopular client dictator. Americans rationalized Thieu's resistance to nation-building projects as a stubbornness borne of a traditional Vietnamese heritage. The Nixon administration did not criticize Thieu's obstructionism too strongly, because US officials did not believe he could help himself.

More important to the Nixon administration was Thieu's apparent capacity to transcend the perceived limitations of his race. While under no illusion that Thieu was a perfect statesman, US officials believed him superior to the alternatives. Saigon's National Assembly and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, in particular, appeared immature and irrational. Thieu accepted American advice regarding economic reform and Vietnamization, and achieved praiseworthy successes in both initiatives. The South Vietnamese president's land reform and pacification campaigns floundered in 1969, but the White House blamed the National Assembly and junior South Vietnamese officials for these failures. By the end of 1969, therefore, Thieu had a reputation in the White House for being an exceptional leader, a South Vietnamese superman. He helped Nixon achieve the rapprochement Washington so desperately desired, and developed a friendly working relationship with the White House.

It was ludicrous, of course, for American policymakers to believe that nobody else in all of South Vietnam could serve as a competent alternative to Thieu. So great was its

contempt for the South Vietnamese, however, that the Nixon administration considered Thieu's superiority obvious. At no point did the White House ever seriously consider replacing Thieu. While the Nixon administration occasionally developed contingency plans to determine what would happen if Thieu fell from power, Washington had no intention of inspiring such eventualities. Three names emerged during the war as possible alternative clients, if Thieu fell to a coup: Nguyen Cao Ky, Tran Thien Khiem, and Tran Van Huong. None of these figures earned enthusiastic support in the White House. Robert Komer believed Khiem might be a more effective leader than Thieu, but he was the only official to voice such an opinion. Komer, moreover, was no longer in Vietnam when he made this argument, in 1972, and lacked significant influence over Nixon's Vietnam policies.<sup>93</sup>

Racism alone does not explain Nixon's support for Saigon's strongman. More traditional interests obviously played a role, as well. Thieu suffered none of the major instabilities of his immediate predecessors. Even Ky, who finally put an end to the cycle of coups in 1965, had faced a major rebellion from South Vietnamese Buddhists. Thieu had no such history, and perhaps benefited from Nixon's perceptions of the Anna Chennault Affair.

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<sup>93</sup> See, for example: Memorandum from John Negroponte to Alexander Haig: Possible Consequences of Thieu Assassination, 14 September 1971, Box 157, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, 3 May 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 398-402 (Document 115); Memorandum from Phil Odeen to Alexander Haig: Alternative GVN Leadership, 20 October 1972, Box 162, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM. For Komer's appointment to Turkey, see: Prados, *Lost Crusader*, 206.



American prejudices reinforced the Nixon-Thieu relationship, though, beyond these more obvious interests. Vietnamese stereotypes seemed to explain Saigon's failures and reinforced the conviction among US officials that Thieu was the only person in the country who was competent to lead. Eventually, the White House adopted those stereotypes as assumed knowledge, and employed them ever more frequently to justify supporting a dictator as part of an effort to disengage from the war. Determined to pursue rapprochement with Saigon in 1969, the Nixon administration eagerly embraced Thieu and derided his political opponents. Convinced that at least some progress had been achieved because of Thieu's efforts, the White House looked forward to the next year's agenda.

### **CHAPTER 3: DISSENT, DESCENT, AND DECENCY, 1970**

In 1969, the Nixon administration fully committed itself to supporting Nguyen Van Thieu. Some officials worried about failed nation-building programs, but the South Vietnamese president had managed to hold his country together while implementing highly controversial policies, including austerity measures and Vietnamization. The prejudices of certain Washington policymakers and glowing reports from Ambassador Bunker helped Thieu maintain American favor. While US officials looked at most South Vietnamese with scorn, Thieu's capacity to maintain stability in a war-torn country and his friendly cooperation with the White House yielded him a reputation for sound judgment and pragmatism.

In 1970, however, Thieu's control over South Vietnam appeared to deteriorate, and Nixon failed to achieve his goal of winning the war through military pressure. Thieu's grasp on power seemed to slip because his heavy-handed repression and acceptance of American advice alienated the South Vietnamese polity. His repression of political dissidents, exemplified in his treatment of Tran Ngoc Chau, disturbed many Americans on both sides of the Pacific. Thieu also thwarted Ambassador Bunker's campaign against corruption by relying on the same types of excuses that he used to derail the political mobilization project (Lien Minh) in 1969.

American officials did not hold Thieu solely responsible for the divisions that emerged in elite South Vietnamese political circles. The White House urged him to continue promoting land and economic reforms, and the battles he fought with the National Assembly over these programs further divided the country. While he eventually

won those conflicts, his pyrrhic victories aroused considerable public dissent. Thieu *did* win them, though, thus reminding his benefactors why they supported him in the first place. He also continued to promote Nixon's highest-priority programs, which further bolstered Thieu's reputation in the White House. While the allies failed to achieve much of significance with an invasion of Cambodia, Thieu's steadfast cooperation was greatly appreciated.

The dynamics that protected Thieu's reputation in the White House in 1969 persisted into 1970, but even Nixon and Kissinger had reason to believe that their client was losing his grip. Uncertainty about Thieu's long-term viability was presumably one of Nixon's reasons for considering a new strategy to get America out of Vietnam. Sometime between late 1970 and early 1971, the US president began contemplating a plan to preserve the Thieu regime only for a short period after a peace agreement was signed. If Saigon fell after all US forces had withdrawn, American prestige would, in theory, remain intact. It is not clear whether Nixon and Kissinger consistently pursued a "decent interval" strategy throughout the war, but they certainly began to mull over such a scheme in 1970. These debates eventually had dire consequences, because Nixon embraced a peace plan in 1972 that virtually guaranteed South Vietnam's eventual demise.

While Nixon may not have relentlessly pursued a decent interval strategy from 1970 forward, he believed that even this minimally acceptable outcome for the war could only be achieved if America's strongman in Vietnam remained in power. Thieu's performance in 1969 confirmed that he was up to the task. The Nixon administration's commitment to Thieu therefore deepened even as South Vietnam struggled with

instability and Independence Palace resorted to brutish thuggery. As Thieu's strength seemed to wane, the White House renewed its efforts to improve his political position in Saigon. Well before the 1971 presidential elections, Bunker and other US officials lobbied Washington to support Thieu's candidacy. Nixon and Kissinger did not need to think long before agreeing.

### **SIGNS OF INSTABILITY**

To senior US officials, Thieu's control of South Vietnam at the beginning of 1970 appeared tenuous. While he had impressed the White House, most South Vietnamese appeared to think differently. Opposition politicians in South Vietnam denounced the 1969 austerity measures, while other critics pressed Thieu to offer major concessions to the enemy in the faltering peace negotiations. As yet, Thieu's opposition was too factionalized to pose a real threat to his regime, and the South Vietnamese president was exercising increasing control over his government. According to a State Department briefing paper, Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem, the controversial appointee of 1969, solidified Thieu's rule by serving as a trusted associate in a sensitive post. South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem claimed, however, that Thieu was becoming increasingly reclusive, refusing even to meet senior members of the National Assembly. Bunker denied this charge, but the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmed Diem's allegations in a January 1970 report.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum: Background on Political Situation in South Viet-Nam, Undated, "Pol 7 – Visits: Vice President to EA – Dec 69 – Jan 70," Box 9, Lot 74D112, RG 59, NARA; Deptel 746 to Paris, 2 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 881, 20 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; "South Viet Nam: Thieu

The Nixon administration also grew concerned about Thieu's lack of popular support. The NSC and Embassy Saigon both lamented the failed effort to form a national political alliance, first in the form of Lien Minh and then with the National Social Democratic Front (NSDF). John Holdridge, an NSC staffer, questioned the sincerity of Thieu's promises to broaden his base of support, and the 40 Committee, a body within the NSC that guided US covert operations, reported that the NSDF was no longer even building provincial branches. Instead of appealing to the masses, Thieu was trying to purchase the loyalty of the member parties in the NSDF in advance of the 1971 presidential election. Bunker was also concerned about Thieu's limited base of support, and speculated about the consequences of a coup.<sup>2</sup>

Even Kissinger, who would not have normally worried about the internal politics of foreign nations, expressed concern about South Vietnamese instability at the beginning of 1970. The national security adviser identified two major sources of popular dissent in Vietnam: government repression, exemplified in Thieu's treatment of opposition National Assemblyman Tran Ngoc Chau, and the 1969 austerity measures. Of these two sources of instability, repression was the lesser challenge to Kissinger's mind. His opinions of the South Vietnamese made it easier to tolerate Thieu's suppression of dissent. The economic

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Faces the Kindergarten," *Time*, 12 January 1970; Senate Foreign Relations Committee Report: Vietnam: December 1969, 30 January 1970, Box 143, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: President Thieu's Recent Remarks on Future Elections, U.S. Troop Presence, and Broadening the Government, 28 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum of the 40 Committee, 12 February 1970, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 569-570 (Document 182); Embtel 2246, 14 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 233-234.

crisis was more important, and Thieu had garnered significant goodwill in the White House by imposing austerity reforms in 1969. In 1970, the White House wanted Thieu to implement measures to clamp down on corruption and protect the previous year's austerity measures from a legislative backlash. Kissinger asked Bunker to figure out how Thieu could implement necessary reforms without stirring controversy.<sup>3</sup>

The US national security adviser may have been nonchalant about Saigon's repression, but it remained a serious concern for US officials in Saigon and Washington. In 1969, Bunker and the State Department fretted about Thieu's heavy-handed treatment of dissidents, arguing that crude violence made the government seem politically weak. Bunker tried in vain throughout 1969 to convince Thieu to moderate punishments for protesters and dissidents. Although Thieu mitigated some sentences, he generally proved unreceptive to Bunker's entreaties. Even US policymakers who disliked Thieu's policies were loath to criticize him in public. Secretary Rogers defended Thieu after the latter closed several South Vietnamese newspapers, for example, and Kissinger publicly dismissed Thieu's threat of harsh punishments for anyone who called for a coalition government with the NLF.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 980-983 (Document 295). The Chau Affair and corruption are discussed below. Thieu successfully defended his austerity measures, so that topic is discussed in the section of this chapter entitled, "Thieu Proves his Worth."

<sup>4</sup> Embtel 3120, 15 February 1969, Box 62, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 22753, 15 November 1969, Box 140, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 13466, 4 July 1969, Box 138, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 5423, 21 March 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; "Thieu Frees Monk; 300 Political Foes Will Get Clemency," *New York Times*, 30 October 1969; Secretary Rogers' News Conference of June 5, 1969, 5 June 1969, Box 71, Folder 6, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Deptel 101002, 19 June 1969, Box

Thieu's repression did not trigger grand discussions of South Vietnamese 'nature,' as did other policy challenges, such as economic reforms or peace negotiations, but the Nixon administration's prejudices nonetheless influenced its responses to such controversies. Historians Seth Jacobs and Mary Renda have both examined the relationship between American racism and nonchalance toward repression in the developing world. Joseph Nevins, an expert on genocide in East Timor, has pointed out that it is easier for observers to ignore atrocities when they believe there are significant differences between themselves and the victims.<sup>5</sup> Since Nixon held most South Vietnamese in contempt, it was easier for him to devote little attention to Thieu's victims. Indeed, the Nixon administration sometimes actively participated in Saigon's repression.

The most prominent target of Thieu's repression was Tran Ngoc Chau, a deputy to the Lower House of the National Assembly. Chau was one of Thieu's former Army colleagues, who had previously served as the province chief of Kien Hoa and as mayor of Danang. In 1966, the CIA nominated him to run the cadre training program in the port town of Vung Tau. The following year, he was elected to the National Assembly, where he rapidly rose to become leader of the opposition bloc and secretary general of the Lower House. Chau's brother, Tran Ngoc Hien, was a North Vietnamese intelligence agent. In mid-1965, Hien asked Chau for a meeting, hoping to recruit his brother to the NLF and open communications between the insurgents and the US ambassador. Thieu

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138, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; U.S. Congress. *Congressional Record*. 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1969. Vol. 115, pt. 12, H: 16637; Background Briefing for Press, 10 June 1969, Box 71, Folder 4, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 15; Renda, *Taking Haiti*, 302-305; Joseph Nevins, *A Not-So-Distant Horror: Mass Violence in East Timor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 10-11.

learned of these discussions after Hien was arrested in 1969, and accused Chau of working for the enemy. Chau denied these charges, claiming that he had kept the CIA informed of his meetings with Hien. Two prominent Americans—John Paul Vann and Edward Lansdale—publicly confirmed Chau’s statements. In fact, the CIA station in Saigon encouraged the relationship in order to learn more about communist attitudes regarding a peace settlement. Chau did not inform his own government about Hien, however, and Vann discouraged Chau from doing so.<sup>6</sup>

Even if he had not committed treason, however, Chau presented a challenge to the Thieu regime. In 1969, he began to advocate for a negotiated settlement with the enemy. He also accused Thieu of bribing members of the National Assembly through a close associate named Nguyen Cao Thang. Seeking to silence criticism of Thieu, the CIA offered Chau money to form a political party. This party would need to support Thieu’s legislative agenda, but Chau would gain considerable prestige as its head. When Chau rejected the offer, the Agency—with Bunker’s approval—initiated a smear campaign against the Assemblyman and encouraged Thieu to arrest him.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 2, S: 2529-2530; CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 2, S: 2529-2530; CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 4, S: 5285-5286; John W. Finney, “Thieu is Accused by Fulbright of Persecuting a Political Foe,” *New York Times*, 6 February, 1970; Ralph Blumenthal, “Chau, Sentenced, Says He Will Serve Nation Again After Peace,” *New York Times*, 6 March 1970; “South Viet Nam: How to Make a Martyr,” *Time*, 9 May 1970; Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, 304-305, 320; Tran Van Dinh, Daniel M. Grady, and Tran Ngoc Chau, “The Statement of Tran Ngoc Chau,” *Antioch Review* 30, 3/4 (Autumn and Winter 1970-1971): 299-310; Zalin Grant, *Facing the Phoenix: The CIA and the Political Defeat of the United States in Vietnam, 1945 to 1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 60-61, 233-235.

<sup>7</sup> Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, 304-305; Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider’s Account of Saigon’s Indecent End Told by the CIA’s Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1977), 15; Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*, 315-317; Dinh,



Arresting Chau for his relationship with Hien, however, raised complications. As a deputy to the National Assembly, Chau had immunity from prosecution. In order to circumnavigate this obstacle, Thieu allegedly bribed and blackmailed over one hundred other deputies into signing a petition to lift Chau's immunity. On February 5, US Senator J. William Fulbright condemned Thieu for the Chau Affair, claiming that Saigon was reacting to the Assemblyman's political opposition instead of any real threat from the meetings with Tran Ngoc Hien. Fulbright also accused the embassy, and Bunker in particular, of failing to intervene on Chau's behalf, as the State Department had ordered. Two weeks later, Fulbright unsuccessfully attempted to draw public attention to the Chau Affair during Senate investigations into the US pacification program in Vietnam. When Chau realized he would not receive support from the White House, he employed the assistance of John Vann and a psychological warfare specialist named Everett Bumgardner to go into hiding. Later, sensing Thieu's forces were closing in on him, he moved into the National Assembly building.<sup>8</sup>

The US embassy recommended against overzealous persecution of Chau because of a possible backlash, but never made any real attempt to secure his release.<sup>9</sup> On February 10, Bunker insisted that even though Thieu had a "disquieting tendency" to

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Grady, and Chau, "The Statement of Tran Ngoc Chau," 299-310; Memorandum of Conversation, 8 March 1970, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 654-655 (Document 198); Thanh Nam, *In the Shadow of the American Embassy* (South Vietnam: Giai Phong Publishing House, 1973), 48-49.

<sup>8</sup> *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 2, S: 2529-2530; John W. Finney, "Thieu is Accused by Fulbright of Persecuting a Political Foe," *New York Times*, 6 February, 1970; Dinh, Grady, and Chau, "The Statement of Tran Ngoc Chau," 299-310; Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003), 475; Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*, 60-61, 227, 301, 320-324.

<sup>9</sup> Embtel 2055, 11 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

silence his critics, he had shown restraint in dealing with Chau.<sup>10</sup> Since the speaker of the Lower House and the chairman of the Senate both agreed to prosecute Chau, Thieu seemed to be following the constitution. Thieu had also promised not to arrest Chau until the Assembly confirmed or rejected the military court's sentence. The ambassador expressed little concern for Thieu's conduct and, in any case, claimed he could not persuade Thieu to be lenient.<sup>11</sup>

Bunker was more than just tolerant of the Chau Affair; he was directly involved. In February 1970, he discovered that Vann was helping Chau hide from the authorities. The ambassador threatened to fire Vann from his job as a civilian pacification official unless he cut all ties to the embattled Assemblyman. Bunker's suggestion that he could not persuade Thieu to be lenient, moreover, was partly an excuse to justify ignoring an order from Under Secretary of State Elliot Richardson to intervene on Chau's behalf.<sup>12</sup> While Richardson, Vann, Bumgardner, and other US officials sought to protect Chau, Bunker remained a powerful ally for Thieu.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Embtel 1974, 10 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>11</sup> Embtel 2055, 11 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM. In fact, Bunker had one last card he could play: the covert funds allocated to Thieu via the US NSC's 40 Committee. In late February, Attorney General John Mitchell convinced the Committee to extend the secret budget for political mobilization, on the condition that Bunker pressure Thieu to moderate Chau's persecution. The Committee left the final decision to Bunker on whether to extend the covert finances. The ambassador recommended sustaining the funding on March 16, despite his lack of success with Thieu, and the Committee concurred. See Memorandum of the 40 Committee, 12 February 1970, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 569-570 (Document 182), footnote 3.

<sup>12</sup> Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*, 60, 301, 317-319.

<sup>13</sup> Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird also believed that Thieu's treatment of Chau was extreme, but he limited his response to a memo to Nixon. See Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, 4 April 1970, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 757-767 (Document 221).

Unfortunately for the US officials advocating for him in Saigon, Chau stirred up public debate about his case by insisting that he had warned Washington shortly before Tet 1968 of an imminent enemy offensive, and that the White House had ignored him. Bunker denied these allegations, but Nguyen Cao Thang, the pharmacist Thieu had employed to bribe members of the National Assembly, published Chau's claim and accused the White House of colluding with the NLF during the Offensive to establish a coalition government. Bunker tried to de-escalate this challenge by discouraging Thieu from punishing Chau. The ambassador believed that the guilty verdict had discredited the Assemblyman, so there was no reason to pursue a sentence that could trigger a popular backlash. Thieu acknowledged these concerns, but insisted that he faced strong popular pressure to prosecute Chau.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, South Vietnamese officials arrested Tran Ngoc Chau and sentenced him, in absentia and without counsel, to twenty years of hard labor. The sentence was later reduced to ten years. The court unexpectedly convened an hour early so Chau's lawyer could not present his case. Senator Fulbright was furious, and introduced an editorial from the *Washington Post* into the Congressional Record arguing that the petition Thieu used to lift Chau's immunity had no legal weight. Only a vote in the National Assembly could remove Chau's protection. Even if the petition had been legal, of course, Thieu faced accusations that he bribed or cajoled Assemblymen into signing it.

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<sup>14</sup> Dinh, Grady, and Chau, "The Statement of Tran Ngoc Chau," 299-310; Embtel 2959, 27 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM (note: The label incorrectly indicates this file is divided into three folders).

The latter allegation was substantiated when two legislators who had signed the petition later changed their minds.<sup>15</sup>

The arrest triggered criticism from the local press and international media, a backlash that John Paul Vann, Elliot Richardson's assistant, and RAND Corporation analyst Daniel Ellsberg encouraged by leaking details about the Chau case. Bunker condemned the press for accepting Chau's story of persecution and even tried to deny that the CIA had encouraged Chau to stay in contact with his brother. The ambassador also protested reports that he condoned Thieu's treatment of Chau, encouraging Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Sullivan to investigate the source of these accusations. Shortly after Sullivan's inquiries led to Richardson's office, the State Department dropped its investigation into the Chau Affair, in order to avoid public disclosure of an attempt to discredit Bunker.<sup>16</sup>

The ambassador also insisted that Thieu had followed South Vietnamese law in his pursuit of charges against Chau. The Supreme Court could only rule that Thieu had misinterpreted the constitution when he sought the petition to remove Chau's immunity, not that he ignored it. If the Court issued such a ruling and Independence Palace complied with its new orders, the legitimacy of the constitution would be upheld. Always seeking to support his friend and ally, Bunker had originally cautioned Thieu against heavy-handed treatment of Chau. He offered this advice because he thought jailing Chau was

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<sup>15</sup> CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 4, S: 5285-5286; CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 5, S: 5944; Goodman, *Politics in War*, 119-120; Dinh, Grady, and Chau, "The Statement of Tran Ngoc Chau," 299.

<sup>16</sup> Embtel 3048, 1 March 1970, Box 144, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Grant, *Facing the Phoenix*, 318-330.

politically inconvenient, not because he respected the Assemblyman. When Thieu forged ahead, anyway, the US embassy came to Saigon's defense.<sup>17</sup>

Thieu had no intention of letting the Supreme Court rule against him. South Vietnamese law made sentences passed in absentia unenforceable, so the government granted Chau a new trial. His lawyers resigned before they reached substantive discussions of the charges, claiming the court had already made its decision. While the lawyers were able to question the legality of the petition, the Thieu regime now claimed it had caught Chau in the act of helping communists. The prosecution could not explain why Chau was not immediately arrested, if he was really caught red-handed, but the petition question was now moot.<sup>18</sup>

The Chau Affair presented a dilemma for the White House because it could not protect Thieu from public criticism. While Kissinger acknowledged that Thieu had gone too far in his persecution of Chau, the national security adviser was far more concerned about potential embarrassment ensuing from this decision than about social justice in South Vietnam. Kissinger minimized the significance of the incident until the South Vietnamese Supreme Court ruled in May that the government's handling of the Chau case was unconstitutional, a conclusion confirmed in the appellate section of the Court in October. Thieu refused to give up, and asked the Assembly on November 14 to remove Chau's immunity to prosecution. Kissinger worried that Thieu's request would reprise old

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<sup>17</sup> Embtel 3048, 1 March 1970, Box 144, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>18</sup> *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 5, S: 5944.

controversies, and that renewed public scrutiny would be particularly harsh because Chau was still in prison.<sup>19</sup>

Thieu soon found a way around the imbroglio. On December 5, Tran Van Linh was elected president of the Supreme Court. Linh was far friendlier to Thieu than his predecessor, under whom the Chau's prosecution was ruled illegal. Thieu kept Chau in jail, hoping the Lower House would act before the government was forced to release its prisoner. The Assembly demurred, however, and sent Thieu a letter claiming they had already acted against Chau. The legislators were disinclined to take further action on this matter. Since neither the Lower House nor Linh's Supreme Court were interested in challenging Thieu over Chau's case, anymore, Thieu effectively won the battle. Chau remained in prison until 1975, when the North Vietnamese annexed the South and transferred him to a special facility for indoctrination. Sometime around Christmas 1977, the communists released Chau, who then fled to California.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Ambassador Bunker's Monthly Report on Vietnam, 13 April 1970, Box 145, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Meeting with Ambassador Bunker, 8 May 1970, Box 146, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Letter from Everett Bumgardner to Rose Mary Woods, 14 May 1970, Box 147, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum of Conversation Between Kissinger and Bunker, 18 November 1970, Box 150, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Developments in the Tran Ngoc Chau Case, 18 November 1970, Box 150, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Dinh, Grady, and Chau, "The Statement of Tran Ngoc Chau," 299.

<sup>20</sup> Alvin Shuster, "South Vietnam's Supreme Court Elects Chief Regarded as Friendly to President Thieu," *New York Times*, 5 December 1970; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Tran Ngoc Chau, 10 December 1970, Box 151, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Appy, *Patriots*, 475-480.

The Chau Affair was just one of thousands of instances of Thieu's repression, but it captured international attention.<sup>21</sup> The drama seriously embarrassed the White House, which played a key role in the scandal. Even Kissinger, who normally would not have cared about such matters, was forced to weigh in on the debates. Bunker could not be too critical of Thieu, given the ambassador's involvement in the affair, and Nixon and Kissinger were far more concerned the potential embarrassment they might face over the Chau Affair than human rights violations. Their contempt for the Vietnamese made it easier for them to ignore Thieu's transgressions, particularly since the South Vietnamese president had otherwise cooperated with the White House. While Thieu's government survived the controversy, his feverish pursuit of Tran Ngoc Chau and the consequent backlash all indicated that South Vietnam was on the precipice of instability.

Corruption also threatened to destabilize South Vietnam, as countless dollars were lost to illegal transactions every year. Although meddling with that system could destabilize the entire government, Washington nonetheless demanded concrete action in 1970 because corruption had become one of the greatest sources of controversy regarding the US alliance with South Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> Flagrant corruption seemed to justify American prejudices toward the South Vietnamese, as Thieu's pretense of fighting crime indicated that he was an exception to the rule. Unwilling to apply significant pressure on Thieu and

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<sup>21</sup> Estimates of the number of prisoners held by the Thieu regime in early 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed, ranged from 35,000 to 200,000. See Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 484-485.

<sup>22</sup> Ironically, Thieu had actually used an earlier anti-corruption campaign to solidify his rule over South Vietnam. Former Prime Minister Tran Van Huong had fiercely promoted an anti-corruption campaign in 1968 and 1969. Thieu used this campaign to replace half of South Vietnam's forty-four province chiefs. Most of the removed officials had been supporters of Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky. See Goodman, *Politics in War*, 100-101.

accepting his moral superiority over his countrymen, Washington allowed its client to thwart the anti-corruption campaign.

When Lyndon Johnson first dispatched military forces to South Vietnam in 1965, he sent with them vast stores of goods and money. The black market ballooned as Vietnamese and Americans alike took advantage of a range of new opportunities to generate wealth. American officials began expressing concern about the scale of corruption in South Vietnam as early as 1967, because such criminality tarnished the South Vietnamese government's reputation and undermined American efforts to generate popular goodwill. Foreign aid dedicated to the pacification effort in rural communities, for example, instead found its way into the hands of urban black marketeers.<sup>23</sup>

Currency manipulation became even more problematic than the black market for consumer goods. Skyrocketing wartime inflation and an unrealistic exchange rate for the piaster caused the South Vietnamese to lose confidence in their currency. Since the Thieu regime did not enforce effective monetary controls, speculators and currency manipulators found it easy to generate profits in illegal markets for US dollars, South Vietnamese piasters, money orders, and even the certificates that the US military distributed to pay its personnel and contractors. These military payment certificates (MPCs) were actually designed to prevent corruption, because they could not be exchanged openly for US dollars. Instead, payees needed to exchange their MPCs for US postal money orders. Unfortunately, black marketeers were often able to cooperate with

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<sup>23</sup> William Allison, "War for Sale: The Black Market, Currency Manipulation and Corruption in the American War in Vietnam," *War & Society* 21 (October 2003): 135-64, p. 135-136, 139, 142. For more examples of corruption in South Vietnam, see: Nam, *In the Shadow of the American Embassy*; Don, *Our Endless War*, 169-171.



US military personnel to circumvent this system. As historian William Allison writes, “currency manipulation was easy, relatively low risk, and extremely profitable.”<sup>24</sup>

Saigon did not cooperate with the US anti-corruption campaign, because fraud was one of the foundations of the Republic of Vietnam. According to historian Gabriel Kolko, Thieu relied heavily on corruption between 1969 and 1973 to stabilize his regime. He lashed out at weak opponents, rewarded supporters, and expanded the bureaucracy in ways that encouraged corruption. Civil servants earned low wages, but there were plenty of opportunities for financial gain, such as charging premiums on government service forms. Junior officers in the RVNAF enjoyed similar benefits, and Thieu promoted politically reliable men to senior ranks.<sup>25</sup> Any attempt to eliminate corruption within the South Vietnamese government threatened to upset the pyramid of patronage that Thieu had deliberately created. As the South Vietnamese president put it, “The best way of avoiding coups d’état is to have these loyal subordinates.”<sup>26</sup>

Complaints about South Vietnamese corruption from the US Congress and the press led Bunker to raise the issue politely with Saigon in 1969. The South Vietnamese had a fourth branch of government called the Censorate, which was tasked with investigating corruption. While it successfully investigated corruption among minor officials, however, it balked when confronted with prestigious defendants from the military. In its first year of operation, between 1968 and 1969, it investigated 2,000 cases of corruption, only twelve of which went to court. Ten officials were fired from their

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<sup>24</sup> Allison, “War for Sale,” 137-139, 143-146. Allison’s article includes numerous examples of how criminals were able to circumvent MPC regulations.

<sup>25</sup> Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 211-221.

<sup>26</sup> Don, *Our Endless War*, 237.

positions, and twenty people faced demotions or transfers.<sup>27</sup> The US embassy lamented that the Censors were themselves corrupt and Thomas Naughton, the assistant director of USAID, complained that the Censorate's role was completely alien to a society that accepted corruption. Naughton suggested that, even if the Censors were honest, they were like a "troop of Boy Scouts at a jamboree encampment in the midst of Sodom and Gomorrah."<sup>28</sup>

Thieu tried to appease the US embassy by forming a Cabinet-level committee on corruption. In 1967, Ambassador Bunker had appointed an Irregular Affairs Committee (IAC), comprised of embassy and military personnel, to combat corruption. The IAC recommended implementing stricter regulations for US contract personnel, and offering support for Saigon's relatively feeble anti-corruption efforts. In 1970, Thieu formed a South Vietnamese IAC to cooperate with its American counterpart. Bunker wanted to make sure this new body was more successful than the Censorate, so he pressed Thieu in January into developing a plan to combat corruption.<sup>29</sup>

Bunker complained that tens of millions of dollars were lost annually to corruption. If Saigon did not clamp down on this problem, Bunker threatened, the US

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<sup>27</sup> Allison, "War for Sale," 161-162; CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1969. Vol. 115, pt. 1, S: 1333; CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1969. Vol. 115, pt. 19, S: 26474; Robert Keatley, "Changing the Guard: U.S. Efforts to Shift Fighting to Vietnamese Face Many Obstacles," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 September 1969; Embtel 20975, 18 October 1969, Box 139, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Proposed Thieu Speech to American People, 27 October 1969, Box 140, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum for the President, 24 November 1969, Box 140, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>28</sup> Allison, "War for Sale," 161-162.

<sup>29</sup> Allison, "War for Sale," 158; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Corruption in South Vietnam, 26 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 1514, 31 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

Congress might reject aid requests for South Vietnam. Thieu's IAC was a good step forward, Bunker granted, but criminality needed to be checked. High-level South Vietnamese officials were clearly protecting smuggling rings at Tan Son Nhut, and the black market in currency remained a problem. At Bunker's urging, Thieu modified the exchange rate at which US military personnel could purchase piasters. Previously, US soldiers traded dollars or MPCs for South Vietnamese piasters at a predetermined exchange rate. American soldiers participated in the currency black market in large part because this "accommodation exchange rate" was drastically different from the black market rate. The new accommodation exchange rate Thieu established in 1970 partially mitigated that problem, but Bunker demanded the destruction of the black market.<sup>30</sup>

The ambassador, sounding more like a preacher than a political envoy, lectured Thieu that corruption was a moral problem that threatened to undermine South Vietnamese society because people worked for their own interests at the expense of public welfare. Thieu listened attentively, and promised to cooperate with an anti-corruption campaign. Bunker reported to Washington that Thieu finally understood the problem, and in fact welcomed the pressure. The ambassador explained that Thieu had not previously understood the scale of the problem. Thieu did not lack intelligence, but was simply too righteous and isolated to have understood the necessity for an anti-

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<sup>30</sup> Embtel 1515, 31 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 23096, 18 November 1969, Box 75, Folder 10, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development*, 184; Allison, "War for Sale," 162.

corruption campaign. Bunker's sermon was glaringly hypocritical. After all, he had secretly provided Thieu with personal funds in 1968 for Lien Minh and the NSDF.<sup>31</sup>

By ignoring corruption, Thieu risked damaging his relationship with the White House. Since so many South Vietnamese officials relied on his patronage, though, Thieu had to ensure that any anti-corruption campaign was ineffective. To please Washington, he created an array of toothless regulations in response to serious cases of corruption, while cracking down on minor ones. For example, he strengthened customs security and seized contraband at the Tan Son Nhut airport and post office. He directed his officials to clamp down on tax evasion, and regulated the rice trade in Military Regions (MR) I and II. Importers that failed to apply full customs fees lost their licenses until the missing funds were collected. Bunker praised this progress, but complained that prosecutions "seemed to drag out endlessly." American efforts to address this problem faced stiff resistance, as Thieu's Cabinet refused to discuss individual cases of corruption with the US embassy. Thieu did not even publicize his anti-corruption campaign in order to earn political points in the United States. As such, the American public doubted that penalties were imposed on convicted criminals.<sup>32</sup>

Thieu claimed that antiquated laws restricted his ability to convict criminals, but he promised Bunker that he would find a solution. There was some truth to that excuse. South Vietnamese officials could not prosecute black marketeers, for example, unless the

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<sup>31</sup> Embtel 1515, 31 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 27 March 1969, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 161-163 (Document 47).

<sup>32</sup> Embtel 16753, 17 October 1970, Box 149, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM

defendants were caught in the act of illegal transactions. According to William Sullivan, chairman of the NSC's Ad Hoc Group on Vietnam, however, there was strong support for an anti-corruption campaign in the South Vietnamese National Assembly. Thieu could also enact decrees, as he had done in 1969 to enforce austerity measures. If Thieu was reluctant to publicize major indictments, it was no doubt because such pronouncements would make alliances with him appear dangerous. Saigon thus resisted pressure from the US embassy and the White House to address corruption in any substantive fashion. Instead, he offered more excuses. When Kissinger's deputy, General Alexander Haig, Jr., visited Saigon in December 1970, he told Thieu that the Oval Office did not want a public debate on corruption during the upcoming US elections. Nixon was more concerned about managing US domestic opinion than eradicating corruption in the Republic of Vietnam. Thieu blamed the Ministry of Justice and the courts for the lack of progress, and offered vague promises to act against this problem, but nothing ever happened.<sup>33</sup>

No senior US official seriously pressed Thieu to end corruption. Bunker made excuses, claiming Thieu's ethical superiority prevented him from understanding the severity of the corruption problem and that domestic constraints prevented him from enforcing effective regulations to curb the black market and other corrupt practices. While the domestic American backlash against South Vietnamese corruption was embarrassing, moreover, Nixon and Kissinger did not believe it was in US interests to resolve injustices in allied territory. The failed anti-corruption campaign indicated that

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<sup>33</sup> Embtel 16753, 17 October 1970, Box 149, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum of Conversation, 17 December 1970, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 223-230 (Document 91); Allison, "War for Sale," 144.

Saigon's internal problems were intensifying, but Washington did not want to disturb its ally too greatly.

The stability of South Vietnam was in far greater doubt among American officials in 1970 than in 1969. As Thieu blocked an American-inspired anti-corruption campaign, a host of dissidents protested the government's repression and harsh economic policies. Despite this dismal record and embarrassing outcomes of the Chau Affair and anti-corruption campaign, however, the White House maintained its support for Thieu. Several factors drove this decision. First, Thieu had learned to evade American advice rather than directly challenge US officials. Washington responded by turning a blind eye to Thieu's brutality and excusing his alleged ignorance of corruption. Second, the two foremost policymakers in the White House—Nixon and Kissinger—ignored social justice problems in Vietnam, unless they stirred domestic American political dissent. Finally, Thieu continued to cooperate with the White House on higher priority programs.

### **THIEU PROVES HIS WORTH**

In 1970, the United States sought the passage of a land reform bill, economic reforms, and an invasion of Cambodia. Thieu finally convinced the National Assembly to authorize the Land-to-the-Tiller Program (LTTP), which had stalled the previous year. Thieu's victory removed a bitter failure from his 1969 record, once again proving his prowess as a leader. Thieu also successfully defended his controversial 1969 austerity measures against domestic opponents. Finally, Thieu cooperated with the White House's efforts to expand the Vietnam War into neighboring countries. These successes offset Thieu's failures, and helped solidify his position as a reliable wartime ally.

The National Assembly had moved slowly on land reform in 1969, but it passed a modified version of Thieu's original bill in early 1970. The South Vietnamese president thus secured a major legislative victory. At the beginning of the New Year, though, US officials were skeptical that Thieu could successfully push a major land reform law through the legislature. During a February meeting with USAID Director John Hannah, Thieu nonetheless promised to pass the bill in short order, and explained that he was only waiting for several senators to return to Saigon to do so. Once they arrived, Thieu had no doubt that he could pass the stalled legislation from 1969<sup>34</sup>

Given the opposition Thieu faced in almost every realm of governance, it is not surprising that Bunker harbored doubts. While there was certainly broad Assembly support for land reform, Bunker claimed its advocates were losing energy. Thieu's vigorous campaign for land reform eventually paid off, though. The Assembly passed a bill very similar to the president's original proposal, and Thieu signed it into law on March 26. The new law stipulated that land was to be distributed freely to peasants, a noticeable improvement over Ngo Dinh Diem's earlier land reform program. Under the LTTP, landlords could not keep land farmed by their tenants, and the current occupants of the land were granted the first opportunities to acquire redistributed property. To commemorate the occasion, Thieu declared a national holiday, and even invited

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<sup>34</sup> "South Viet Nam: Thieu Faces the Kindergarten," *Time*, 12 January 1970; Embtel 2393, 17 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM. For a brief summary of the history of land reform in South Vietnam and the stalled 1969 legislation, see Chapter 2.

representatives from the National Assembly to join in the inaugural ceremony. Bunker was delighted by the shrewd effort to improve executive-legislative relations.<sup>35</sup>

The US Congress and press welcomed the land reform program. Representative John Moss (D-CA), Senator James Pearson (R-KS), and Senator John Sherman Cooper (R-KY) all praised the LTTP as a tool to significantly improve the life of the South Vietnamese peasantry. *Time* magazine credited Thieu for breaking with historical tradition in Saigon and passing meaningful legislation. During a trip to Saigon in the summer, Secretary Rogers also congratulated Thieu for the landmark bill.<sup>36</sup> At least to senior officials in the White House, a successful champion for poor farmers had overcome greedy legislators, thus demonstrating that Thieu could still control his government.

Thieu was also able to mitigate some of the worst damage inflicted as a result of the controversial 1969 austerity measures. Under American pressure, Thieu had imposed spending cuts and higher taxes on South Vietnam, in an attempt to improve government revenues and control spiraling inflation. When the National Assembly failed to pass Thieu's proposed austerity bill, the president employed extraordinary powers granted to

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<sup>35</sup> Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Status of Land Reform in South Vietnam, 27 February 1970, Box 75, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 4575, 27 March 1970, Box 144, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example: *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 7, H: 9466-9467; *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 7, S: 9596-9597; *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 11, S: 14823-14825; "South Viet Nam: Pursuing the Peasantry," *Time*, 6 April 1970; Memorandum from Marshall Green to Secretary Rogers: Baltimore Sun Article on President Thieu's Political Strategy, 7 April 1970, "E-12 Land Reform, Jan-June 1970," Box 23, Lot 71D31, 72D61, 73D65, 74D44, 74D469, RG 59, NARA; Memorandum from Executive Secretary Theodore Eliot to Kissinger: Implementation of the Land Reform Program in South Viet-Nam, 6 August 1970, Box 148, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.



him under the 1967 constitution to promulgate the laws by decree. The backlash he faced as a result convinced Thieu to request ratification of the austerity measures from the National Assembly in 1970. Washington did not consider the economic reform project complete, so Thieu needed to develop a better working relationship with the legislature if he wanted to pass further measures to strengthen the economy.<sup>37</sup> Facing a divided polity and long list of priorities, he tried to steer the economy back on track.

In April 1970, the piaster's value was tumbling, and the South Vietnamese Supreme Court was poised to declare the 1969 austerity decrees unconstitutional. Bunker warned Thieu that further US assistance depended on Saigon's ability to increase revenues by combating smuggling, the black market, and tax evasion. As mentioned above, Bunker also encouraged Thieu to modify the accommodation exchange rate at which US soldiers could purchase piasters, to remove the incentive for Americans to participate in the currency black market. Thieu said he wanted to work with the Assembly to pass appropriate legislation, but the process could not be rushed. If he issued further decrees, he risked drawing fire for acting like a dictator.<sup>38</sup>

Thieu sought instead to enact a "program law" that would grant him broad economic powers. He intended to consult the Senate Finance Committee on the plan, in order to garner Assembly support for the measure, and believed that the Supreme Court would support such a law if the Assembly reaffirmed the austerity taxes before April 28.

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<sup>37</sup> Memorandum from EA/VN to the Under Secretary, 9 January 1970, "Pol 2f – Memoranda, Reports, for Under Secretary, 1970," Box 9, Lot 74D112, RG 59, NARA; "South Viet Nam: Thieu Faces the Kindergarten," *Time*, 12 January 1970. For more information about the 1969 austerity measures, see Chapter 2.

<sup>38</sup> Embtel 5339, 9 April 1970, Box 145, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

Thieu also intended to ask the Court to withhold further judgments about the austerity measures before the Assembly voted on this law. Bunker was glad Thieu had a clear plan, but he doubted the program law would pass; in any case, Thieu's economic advisers appeared too fractious to give their president sound policy advice. The White House responded to Bunker's skepticism by holding back foreign aid to encourage Saigon to produce a strong economic policy.<sup>39</sup>

In late April, the Lower House of the National Assembly retroactively ratified Thieu's austerity measures with minor changes. The Senate was expected to do the same, but the State Department doubted that Saigon's legislators would suddenly prove cooperative after the battles of 1969. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Sullivan sent Bunker a proposal for an ambitious reform program for South Vietnam, including greater reliance on domestic production than commercial imports; the imposition and enforcement of tough new tax laws; and a visit by the International Monetary Fund to guide economic policy. Bunker did not embrace the plan because he believed that South Vietnamese officials lacked any motivation to implement it. The government did not want to raise taxes, however necessary that might be. Bunker did not explicitly exclude Thieu from this criticism, but explained that the South Vietnamese president seemed determined to implement necessary reforms. Bunker spoke of broader

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<sup>39</sup> Embtel 5339, 9 April 1970, Box 145, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 980-983 (Document 295).

official South Vietnamese resistance to higher taxes, which implied that Thieu was more reasonable than his colleagues in the executive branch and National Assembly.<sup>40</sup>

The South Vietnamese Supreme Court ruled Thieu's austerity decrees illegal in May, putting even the limited economic reforms achieved thus far at risk. Thieu insisted that the ruling was only a temporary setback, and that the Senate would eventually approve the new measures. Laurence E. Lynn, a staff member in the US National Security Council, however, concluded that the program law was doomed. Part of the problem might have been that Washington was not applying all of the financial leverage it could to compel meaningful economic reforms. Senator Stephen Young (D-OH) complained in mid-July that Thieu received \$100 million dollars for a new program to feed and house the South Vietnamese soldiers.<sup>41</sup> While Washington had threatened to cut off aid if Saigon did not pass meaningful economic reforms, Nixon had not cut off funding entirely.

The US embassy continued to lobby Saigon for economic reforms and, on September 29, the Assembly finally passed a restricted version of the program law, granting Thieu the power to establish a government-controlled market for exports, some imports, and other transactions. While the official exchange rate for the South Vietnamese

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<sup>40</sup> Under Secretary's Report, 1 May 1970, "Pol 2f – Memoranda, Reports for Under Secretary, 1970," Box 9, Lot 74D112, RG 59, NARA; Deptel 66695, 2 May 1970, Box 146, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 6706, 2 May 1970, Box 146, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>41</sup> Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Recent Statements by President Thieu, 21 May 1970, Box 146, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from Laurence E. Lynn, Jr. to Kissinger: May 20<sup>th</sup> VSSG Meeting, 23 May 1970, Box 146, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 18, S: 23820-23821.

piaster did not reflect its true value, the new parallel market would reduce inflation by establishing more realistic rates. Under Thieu's guidance, the government revised its interest rates and made a show of clamping down on smuggling. By December, Bunker could report that major economic reforms had been initiated, that the inflation rate was declining, and that Saigon had established a reasonable accommodation exchange rate for foreign soldiers. Bunker explained that Thieu had raised some import taxes to improve the government's revenue stream, and allowed the price of imported rice to rise. Thieu also increased the wages for servicemen and civil servants, who would otherwise need to resort to corrupt practices to earn a living. To further bolster government revenues, the Assembly was considering legislation to expand oil exploration and revise several laws to encourage foreign investment. These policies had a positive effect on the South Vietnamese economy, Bunker argued, and only the inflation of rice prices caused major popular dissent. The embassy and Thieu regime now began a joint year-end economic review to consider rules for future economic reforms, should they be necessary.<sup>42</sup>

Thieu again demonstrated courage to resolve dire economic challenges. As a result, he earned more goodwill from the US ambassador. Bunker claimed that Thieu's close cooperation with the National Assembly proved his "commitment to the constitutional process" and helped "prepare public opinion for the hard decisions

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<sup>42</sup> Tuan, *South Vietnam, Trial and Experience*, 157-167; Embtel 12765, 8 August 1970, Box 148, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 13003, 12 August 1970, Box 148, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 16036, 3 October 1970, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 20010, 21 December 1970, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

ahead.”<sup>43</sup> News of this success helped balance the negative reports Bunker sent regarding other policies. Conservative commentators were thrilled; the *Wall Street Journal* predicted the reforms would improve Thieu’s odds of winning a second term. If further efforts were required in the future, moreover, Independence Palace would enjoy more support. The new Supreme Court president, Tran Van Linh, was much closer to Thieu, as demonstrated by his refusal to contest the government’s persecution of Chau. The judiciary was thus unlikely to present another challenge to Saigon’s economic policies.<sup>44</sup>

Thieu improved his reputation in the White House by achieving legislative victories on land and economic reform, but he also proved his worth by supporting Nixon’s efforts to widen the war. The South Vietnamese military, bolstered by Vietnamization, failed to achieve tangible, long-term results during a 1970 attack on enemy positions in Cambodia, but the Nixon administration nonetheless declared the operation a grand success. While the White House interpreted Thieu’s land and economic reforms as uncompromised victories, the Cambodian Incursion was vastly more important to Nixon. Thieu’s assistance in this operation, therefore, probably did more to bolster his reputation with the US president than South Vietnamese domestic reforms.

Cambodia emerged as an independent state after World War II, following the collapse of French power in Indochina. Under the guidance of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia adopted a neutral foreign policy in 1955 even while accepting US military and

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<sup>43</sup> Embtel 16036, 3 October 1970, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>44</sup> Peter R. Kann, “Cooling an Economy: Vietnam’s Inflation Fight is Succeeding Beyond All Hopes as Reforms Take Hold,” *Wall Street Journal*, 24 December 1970; Alvin Shuster, “South Vietnam’s Supreme Court Elects Chief Regarded as Friendly to President Thieu,” *New York Times*, 5 December 1970.

economic aid. Over time, however, Sihanouk moved closer to the political left. In 1963, he rejected American foreign aid and, two years later, granted the North Vietnamese secret authorization to maintain bases inside Cambodian territory. The controversial Operation Menu bombings of 1969 had been designed in part to eliminate these bases. Over the course of the 1960s, these and certain domestic policy decisions alienated him from both conservative and leftist political leaders. After the Tet Offensive, Sihanouk faced an intensifying rebellion from the Communist Party of Kampuchea. To balance out this deficit of support from the left, Sihanouk tried in vain to repair relations with the United States. Washington welcomed Cambodia's pro-American prime minister, Lon Nol, who seized power in a March 1970 coup. While Nixon and Kissinger denied it, Sihanouk believed that the CIA had facilitated his overthrow.<sup>45</sup>

The Nixon administration quickly recognized the new Cambodian government, and authorized joint US-South Vietnamese raids against North Vietnamese units across the border. Cambodia had not been safe before Sihanouk was overthrown. Over 100,000 tons of ordnance fell in Cambodia during the fifteen-month Operation Menu bombings. After Lon Nol's coup, however, there were fewer legal restrictions on US and RVNAF strikes against North Vietnamese supply routes along the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Second Edition (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 173-206; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 276-277, 288-290; Kenton J. Clymer, "Cambodia and Laos in the Vietnam War," in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 356-381, p. 371.

<sup>46</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 276, 290.

Nixon ordered an invasion of Cambodia, hoping a major expansion of the war might convince Hanoi that it needed to compromise in the peace talks. He also wanted to knock out the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the NLF headquarters. Together, American and South Vietnamese soldiers attacked regions labeled as the Parrot's Beak and Fishhook, with moderate success. Allied forces killed roughly 2,000 enemy combatants, cleared 1,600 acres of land, and captured thousands of weapons and enemy documents. The ARVN performed reasonably well, but allied forces could not locate COSVN. North Vietnamese logistics were temporarily disrupted, and Hanoi's forces retreated, but the communists quickly re-established their supply routes. To make matters worse, the Cambodian Incursion reinvigorated the US antiwar movement, which continued to hamper Nixon's range of options for fighting the war.<sup>47</sup>

Thieu cooperated with the White House throughout the Cambodian campaign. For years, the Johnson and Nixon administrations had authorized intelligence and reconnaissance raids into Cambodia, targeting North Vietnamese units. These attacks, codenamed "Salem House" and later "Daniel Boone" raids, escalated during Nixon's first term. Nixon also authorized logistical support for ARVN raids against Cambodia, even after the coup. When Bunker asked Thieu to cease such attacks until the allies could plan a more decisive response, Saigon quickly concurred. Thieu had already issued orders banning offensive cross-border operations, except in cases when Lon Nol's forces asked

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<sup>47</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 291-297. For more information on developments in Cambodia, see: Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 715-752; David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 192-210.

for help defending themselves. Thieu envisioned larger operations in the future, but Bunker warned against hasty action.<sup>48</sup>

Thieu then helped pave the way for the Incursion by promising cordial relations with the Lon Nol regime. In a message to the National Assembly, he declared his respect for Cambodian sovereignty and neutrality, and recommended that Saigon and Phnom Penh re-establish diplomatic relations. Thieu also condemned Hanoi for keeping soldiers in Laos and Cambodia. He said nothing of a large-scale military operation, and spoke mostly of diplomatic responses to the crisis. This measured approach was risky for Thieu, who had the sympathy of US embassy officials for taking it. If Saigon failed to respond to Cambodian cries for help or the communists were too successful in that region, Thieu feared, the South Vietnamese public would blame him for not responding quickly enough. Bunker, with Kissinger's support, urged Washington to remove its prohibitions on raids across the Cambodian border, but Nixon was preparing for a larger operation.<sup>49</sup>

While the White House had prohibited cross-border raids, Saigon was still not an entirely passive observer of events in Cambodia. At the urging of Bunker and General Abrams, Thieu agreed to ship AK-47s to Lon Nol's forces, so they could sustain their fight against the communist Khmer Rouge. Still, Thieu wanted to react more proactively to the communist threat in Cambodia by launching a major invasion in cooperation with

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<sup>48</sup> Embtel 4195, 20 March 1970, Box 144, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 488; Embtel 4725, 30 March 1970, Box 144, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), 236-237; Clymer, "Cambodia and Laos in the Vietnam War," 364-370.

<sup>49</sup> Embtel 5092, 6 April 1970, Box 145, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 11 April 1970, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 803-805 (Document 227).



the United States. Thieu understood the need to establish warm relations with Lon Nol, first, and to maintain the illusion of Cambodian neutrality in the short term. He was, however, coming under increasing pressure to strike out at North Vietnamese and NLF bases in Cambodia while the enemy was vulnerable. Working with Lon Nol was also proving difficult as Phnom Penh stirred up ultra-nationalist sentiment, resulting in atrocities against ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia.<sup>50</sup>

Thieu was relieved of this uncomfortable restraint when the Cambodian Incursion finally began in late April. By the summer of 1970, the operation was virtually over. Nixon had promised to remove all US forces from Cambodia by June 30. Nguyen Cao Ky publicly disagreed with this restriction, claiming ARVN could handle fighting in both Cambodia and South Vietnam. Thieu had placed his old rival in charge of Saigon's relations with Cambodia, but now relieved him of duty. Thieu was concerned about wasting South Vietnamese resources in a longer cross-border campaign, so the June 30 deadline suited him. After ARVN withdrew, Saigon sent Lon Nol supplies and advisers, hoping to strengthen South Vietnam's vulnerable neighbor against further communist encroachment. Thieu reported that ARVN was attempting to secure the border, and would not conduct operations deep into Cambodian territory unless Lon Nol requested assistance. Bunker was pleased with Thieu's cooperative spirit, even though the allies had failed to achieve their primary goal: locating COSVN.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Embtel 6280, 24 April 1970, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Letter from Thieu to Nixon, 24 April 1970, Box 766, Folder 3, NSCF, Presidential Correspondence, 1969-1974 [Hereafter PC], RNLM; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 175.

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Vietnam, 26 May 1970, Box 146, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Haig's Conversation with

Throughout the rest of the year, the Nixon administration clung to the Cambodian Incursion as a successful allied initiative.<sup>52</sup> The results of the campaign were dubious, but Thieu's performance was remarkable. His stalwart adherence to the American agenda was greatly appreciated, particularly compared to Ky's belligerent ramblings about the withdrawal deadline. The Incursion was one of the Nixon Administration's most important and controversial policies in 1970, and Thieu's cooperation helped him earn significant goodwill in the White House.

## NIXON REASSESES HIS WAR GOALS

Unfortunately for Washington, Thieu's virtues did not prove that Saigon could prevail in the war. Nixon became increasingly distressed by South Vietnamese instability and his inability to win the war through military pressure. He thus began to consider an alternative resolution to the conflict. The US president respected and admired Thieu, but he also felt obliged to prioritize American national security interests over his personal

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Thieu, 26 May 1970, Box 146, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 27 May 1970, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 1011-1013 (Document 310); Embtel 10652, 5 July 1970, Box 148, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 13850, 26 August 1970, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; *CR*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970. Vol. 116, pt. 12, S: 16485-16486; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: The Recent Flare-Up Between President Thieu and Vice President Ky, 24 August 1970, Box 148, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, 245. After the Incursion, tensions emerged between Phnom Penh and Saigon over military operations and payments for such excursions. See Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 175-179.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Private Meeting with the Vice President on His Visit to East Asia, 31 August 1970, Box 82, Folder Not Numbered, White House Special Files [Hereafter WHSF], Staff Member and Office Files [Hereafter SMOF], President's Office Files [Hereafter POF], Memoranda for the President [Hereafter MP], RNLM; Embtel 16777, 17 October 1970, Box 149, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum of Conversation, 17 December 1970, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 223-230 (Document 91).

feelings of loyalty to an ally. Between late 1970 and early 1971, therefore, Nixon mulled over a new strategy to minimize American losses in Vietnam. If the White House could secure a peace agreement that allowed South Vietnam to survive for a few years before its final collapse, perhaps American credibility—and Nixon’s prestige—could be preserved. Thieu’s help would be needed, however, if the White House decided to pursue this approach, which became known as the “decent interval” strategy. The Nixon administration believed most South Vietnamese were incapable of governing themselves, but Thieu’s performance up to 1970 convinced the White House that he could at least keep South Vietnam afloat while the United States withdrew its troops.

The 1970 negotiations in Paris accomplished very little. When Nixon learned that North Vietnamese infiltration into the South increased between December 1969 and January 1970, his instinct was to attack. To his dismay, however, General Abrams argued that bombing would have little impact on the ground. Nixon wanted Abrams “to step up the attacks in the South,” but he was just as pessimistic about achieving anything significant with military escalation. In a conversation with Kissinger, Nixon said, “I want to look down the road and see when we are going to get this damn thing over with. There is no answer to winning it.” Kissinger believed the right kind of pressure could force an opening in the negotiations, however, so Nixon pursued the bombing tactic. Attacks on North Vietnam would almost certainly derail the peace talks, so Nixon limited B-52 strikes to Hanoi’s supply lines in Laos.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 186-190.

Meanwhile, the American and North Vietnamese delegates in Paris organized a meeting between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, one of the leading members of Hanoi's Politburo. As the talks progressed, the US national security adviser sent Nixon optimistic, but unrealistic, reports about the prospects for a negotiated peace. Le Duc Tho, however, treated the negotiations as another front in the war. In his view, the antiwar movement was imposing restrictions on Washington that would only increase with time. Hanoi also had little incentive to end the war immediately, because the losses suffered during the Tet Offensive weakened the communists' negotiating position.<sup>54</sup> While the delegates were still far from reaching a peace settlement, Kissinger made it very clear to Le Duc Tho that Washington would force Saigon to accept whatever agreement the US and North Vietnamese delegates reached: "We do not ask about your making an agreement and the NLF's not agreeing" because "we assume you will use your influence. The same will be true with us."<sup>55</sup>

The talks stalled in early April, when Nixon grew even more determined to end the war.<sup>56</sup> To break the logjam, the US president authorized the Cambodian Incursion, which yielded dubious results. Then he accepted a North Vietnamese proposal for a "ceasefire in place," which would take effect when a peace treaty was signed. Thieu worried about this provision, because a ceasefire in place left all contending forces in their current locations. The North Vietnamese had never admitted to the presence of their troops in the South, but such an agreement would allow them to remain in the field.

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<sup>54</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 188-190; Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 104; Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace*, 340-341; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 185.

<sup>55</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 67.

<sup>56</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 189.

Kissinger had previously favored a ceasefire after “regroupment,” wherein belligerent forces withdrew to specified regions that were clearly under the control of one of the warring parties. Under such a scheme, enemy forces would have a legal obligation to withdraw from territory under Thieu’s control. By the end of 1970, though, Kissinger conceded that a ceasefire in place was the only concession Washington could reasonably offer Hanoi to facilitate negotiations. Nixon confirmed US acceptance of a ceasefire in place in a speech on October 7, one month before the US mid-term elections.<sup>57</sup>

Washington did not completely abandon Thieu. While a ceasefire in place might create conditions necessary for a final settlement, it did not necessarily isolate Saigon. Historian Jeffrey Kimball argues that Kissinger maintained his demand for mutual withdrawals in the negotiations with Le Duc Tho. The national security adviser suggested that American forces could commit a legally recognized withdrawal if the North Vietnamese, in return, withdrew secretly. Hanoi’s negotiator rejected this offer in February as a meaningless gesture, but Kissinger had at least made an attempt to remove enemy forces from South Vietnam. Nixon also made clear in his October 7 speech that the ceasefire in place was only designed to facilitate negotiations, and did not constitute a final settlement.<sup>58</sup>

Both Nixon and Kissinger believed that they could force the Communists to negotiate seriously in Paris. Convinced that the invasion of Cambodia had destroyed North Vietnamese morale, Kissinger carried out fruitless talks with the head of North

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<sup>57</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 212-213; Goodman, *The Lost Peace*, 107-110; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 68-69, 77; Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace*, 338-339; Kissinger, “The Vietnam Negotiations,” 226-227.

<sup>58</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 188, 234; Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace*, 338.

Vietnam's negotiating team, Xuan Thuy. Hanoi still demanded an unconditional withdrawal and the overthrow of the Thieu regime. Kissinger grumbled that the White House would never take such a step; that was Hanoi's job. In January 1971, he repeated the sentiment: "If the Vietnamese can agree among themselves on a reasonable compromise and if thereafter, war breaks out again between North and South Vietnam, that conflict will no longer be an American affair; it will be an affair of the Vietnamese themselves."<sup>59</sup> To preserve American credibility, therefore, Thieu only needed to survive for a decent interval.

Historians are divided over the strengths of arguments that Nixon pursued a decent interval. Some scholars believe that the Nixon administration resolved to cut its losses by preserving South Vietnam only for a few years. Other scholars argue that there is insufficient evidence in the archives to prove that Nixon relentlessly pursued a decent interval strategy for most of the war. These scholars differ over Nixon's true strategy. Some of them contend that Nixon foresaw the collapse of the postwar ceasefire, and intended to use violations as a pretext for staying engaged. Others, by contrast, believe that the Nixon administration did not try to establish a decent interval, but the Paris Peace Accords created one. A final answer to the decent interval question cannot be ascertained until all of the relevant archival materials are declassified.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 253-257.

<sup>60</sup> For arguments that Nixon pursued a decent interval strategy, see: Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972*, vol. 2 of *Nixon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 387; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 257; Jussi Hanhimäki, "Selling the 'Decent Interval': Kissinger, Triangular Diplomacy, and the End of the Vietnam War, 1971-1973," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14, no. 1 (March 2003): 159-194, p. 161; Jeffrey Kimball, "The Case of the 'Decent Interval': Do We Now Have a Smoking Gun?"

Whether Nixon relentlessly pursued a decent interval or not, he definitely considered such an approach. His decision to accept a ceasefire in place certainly left Saigon vulnerable when the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973. South Vietnam was experiencing fresh instabilities, and Nixon was frustrated with his inability to end the war quickly. He also worried that the war was undermining American prestige around the world, and his own chances for re-election in 1972.<sup>61</sup> While Thieu agreed in the end to sign the Accords, the decent interval theory—if accurate—would represent a gross betrayal of Saigon. Kissinger did not keep Thieu sufficiently informed about the negotiations and Washington's later promises of support for Thieu would thus have been demonstrably misleading.<sup>62</sup> In any case Thieu was in no position to reject the final agreement because Saigon was simply too dependent on Washington's patronage. Nixon might have claimed there were good reasons to abandon South Vietnam—there had been little progress in the war, the South Vietnamese were too weak, the North Vietnamese and

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*SHAFR Newsletter* 32, no. 3 (September 2001): 35-39; Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 121-198; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*; and Jeffrey Kimball, "Decent Interval or Not? The Paris Agreement and the End of the Vietnam War," *SHAFR Newsletter* (December 2003), available online at [www.shafr.org](http://www.shafr.org). For arguments that Nixon did not pursue a decent interval, see: Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 8-9; Larry Berman, "A Final Word on the 'Decent Interval' Strategy," *SHAFR Newsletter* (December 2003), available online at [www.shafr.org](http://www.shafr.org); Snapp, *Decent Interval*, 50; Pierre Asselin, "Kimball's Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 1 (January 2006): 163-167. Certain files may prove particularly helpful in resolving the decent interval debate, particularly the remaining classified national security files in Nixon's presidential library and Kissinger's papers in the Library of Congress.

<sup>61</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 229-230, 239-240; Kimball, "The Case of the 'Decent Interval'."

<sup>62</sup> More details about Washington's promises of support for Thieu can be found below, as well as in Chapter 4 and 5.

NLF were too strong, and so on—but such rationalizations would not change the fact that Washington betrayed Thieu.

In Saigon, Bunker was responsible for keeping Thieu informed of the private negotiations and bringing him along on the ceasefire proposal. The ambassador was never given a full account of the peace talks between Washington and Hanoi, but he cooperated when Kissinger decided in March to probe the North Vietnamese delegation discretely regarding an internal South Vietnamese political settlement. Bunker noted the problem with this approach—the White House had promised Thieu it would not discuss internal South Vietnamese matters—but Kissinger's rosy reports from Paris consoled the ambassador. Bunker told Thieu that Hanoi was moving toward the American position in the talks. The communists were not so quick to dismiss proposals for mutual US and North Vietnamese withdrawals, Bunker explained, and Kissinger would never abandon the current Saigon regime. Thieu did not believe that the North Vietnamese were negotiating in good faith. His intelligence sources indicated that Hanoi wanted to stall the negotiations, hoping the US antiwar movement would eventually force Nixon to withdraw American soldiers without securing a deal that would protect the South.<sup>63</sup>

Thieu nonetheless did his best to appear cooperative. He stood strongly against a coalition government, but convinced Bunker that he was flexible. At Secretary Laird's suggestion, Thieu agreed to release five hundred prisoners of war (POW) as a gesture of good faith. Deputy Ambassador Samuel Berger assured Thieu that Hanoi could not ignore such a gesture, and that the communists would need to make concessions of their own.

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<sup>63</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 68-72.



Thieu also agreed not to dismiss enemy ceasefire proposals out of hand, even though he did not believe Hanoi would honor the terms of such an agreement. The South Vietnamese president suggested that it might be better issue their own ceasefire proposal, first, as long as certain conditions were met. He specifically insisted on international supervision of the ceasefire; prohibitions on enemy terrorism and infiltration; and regroupment of non-South Vietnamese forces. While he did not specifically mention North Vietnamese withdrawals, Thieu indicated to Bunker in February that he considered them a crucial aspect of regroupment.<sup>64</sup>

Over the next several weeks, Saigon wavered on whether to accept a ceasefire in place, as Nixon desired, and which of the above terms had to be satisfied first. While leaving enemy forces in the field would certainly be dangerous, regroupment would be extraordinarily complicated. The NLF did not operate from fixed bases, for example, and regrouping US helicopters would severely hamper medical evacuations for South Vietnamese personnel. Thieu also reneged on his promise to release five hundred POWs, reducing the number to three hundred and twenty-three sick and injured prisoners. Much to Laird's displeasure, Thieu said that he could not release men who would return to kill more of his people. Bunker decided that the South Vietnamese had not devoted sufficient

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<sup>64</sup> Embtel 364, 8 January 1970, Box 70, Folder 13, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 398, 9 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Terence Smith, "Thieu Gets Tougher with Everyone," *New York Times*, 11 January 1970; Embtel 1514, 31 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 2056, 11 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 2691, 21 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM (Note: The label incorrectly indicates this file is divided into three folders); Deptel 32266, 5 March 1970, Box 144, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM

thought to a ceasefire, and that Thieu mostly entertained the idea because he wanted to gain political points for acting like a peacemaker.<sup>65</sup>

Thieu's inconsistency was worrisome, so Washington dispatched Rogers to Saigon in July. While Nixon and Kissinger schemed, the secretary of state listened to Thieu's thoughts on the peace process. He reassured Thieu that the White House would not seek a separate peace, as some US spokesmen—including Rogers—had inadvertently implied. Thieu said he understood, but officials at lower levels of his government worried about US intentions. Nixon startled those officials during an April 20 speech when he said that the people of South Vietnam must determine the shape of their government, but added vague comments about achieving a balance of political forces. Some unnamed South Vietnamese policymakers, Thieu claimed, interpreted Nixon's comments as a call for a coalition government. Rogers promised the White House would not betray Saigon.<sup>66</sup>

The secretary of state must have been at least partially successful in his efforts to console Thieu, because the South Vietnamese president quickly became open to

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<sup>65</sup> Embtel 3039, 28 February 1970, Box 143, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM (note: the label incorrectly indicates this file is divided into three folders); Embtel 3818, 14 March 1970, Box 144, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: GVN Position on Cease-Fire Takes Complete Turn, 23 March 1970, Box 144, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, 4 April 1970, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 757-767 (Document 221).

<sup>66</sup> Embtel 10664, 5 July 1970, Box 148, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 980-983 (Document 295); Embtel 11574, 18 July 1970, Box 148, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; "Southeast Asia: Apprehensive Allies," *Time*, 20 July 1970. Nixon's April 20 speech is available at: Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in Vietnam," published online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)), © 1999-2011.

discussing a ceasefire again. He recommended presenting an allied ceasefire proposal, because it would make Thieu and Nixon look like “gentlemen,” though he remained skeptical about the prospects of ending the war through negotiations.<sup>67</sup> When Rogers and Thieu parted ways, they presented a united front to the world. Rogers said Washington and Saigon were of a similar mind on peace issues, and Thieu dismissed rumors that the White House would impose a coalition government on Saigon.<sup>68</sup>

The secretary of state returned to Washington and told Nixon and NSC on July 21 that Thieu was now taking the lead on ceasefire negotiations. Indeed, Thieu tried to keep up the momentum. He offered constructive advice about how to present a peace proposal to Hanoi, and publicized his private comments to Bunker, saying he could accept a ceasefire under international supervision so long as the enemy halted infiltration and terrorism. According to the ambassador, Thieu’s statement was designed to help the South Vietnamese public understand that Saigon must be open to negotiations, and willing to make concessions to facilitate peace.<sup>69</sup> Bunker thus reinforced the Nixon administration’s impression that the South Vietnamese were an irrational rabble in desperate need of an education from the enlightened Thieu.

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<sup>67</sup> Embtel 10664, 5 July 1970, Box 148, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Secretary Rogers’ Conversations with Thieu, Ky, Khiem and Lam, 10 July 1970, Box 148, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>68</sup> Secretary Rogers’ News Conference, 15 July 1970, “Press Conferences, 1970,” Box 2, Lot 73D443, RG 59, NARA; Embtel 11574, 18 July 1970, Box 148, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>69</sup> Minutes of NSC Meeting, 21 July 1970, Box H-109, Folder 7, NSCIE, NSCMM, RNLM; Embtel 12017, 27 July 1970, Box 148, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 24 September 1970, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 117-118 (Document 44).

The White House welcomed Thieu's cooperation on a ceasefire proposal, but the NLF had forced his hand. Nguyen Thi Binh, foreign minister for the NLF's Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), had already issued a peace proposal that put Washington and Saigon on the defensive. Thieu was also acting against his will. Through a "special and sensitive source," the CIA learned that Thieu had not wanted to issue another peace proposal in 1970. He preferred to wait for concessions from Hanoi and the NLF, but could not afford to be excluded from American initiatives. It was not in Saigon's interest to block Nixon's ceasefire proposal in the fall.<sup>70</sup>

And so, on October 7, Nixon publicly proposed a ceasefire in place. Thieu endorsed Nixon's offer, and said he was eager to participate in negotiations. Bunker unsuccessfully urged Thieu to articulate his own peace proposal, as well, to supplement Nixon's speech with a statement that proved the South Vietnamese were equally forthcoming on peace issues. The ambassador interpreted Thieu's resistance as a sign that the South Vietnamese president did not have enough public support to go beyond his 11 July 1969 offer of letting the NLF participate in a general election. While Bunker noted that Thieu had been quite pragmatic in his approach to peace negotiations, the ambassador complained that the rest of the South Vietnamese were apprehensive about the talks. Thieu did not offer such an excuse, but Bunker's perceptions of the Vietnamese

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<sup>70</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 24 September 1970, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 117-118 (Document 44).

made it easy to believe that they were irrationally resisting the pragmatic leadership of their president.<sup>71</sup>

The peace process was more complicated in 1970 than in the previous year. Nixon and Kissinger kept Thieu uninformed about the true nature of the secret negotiations, and contemplated a grand betrayal of Saigon. Nixon and Kissinger's consideration of a decent interval strategy was based more on their devotion to *realpolitik* than animosity toward Thieu, who was personally cooperative when the White House asked him to endorse a ceasefire proposal. Bunker, Kissinger, Nixon, and even Rogers were pleased with Thieu's performance, convinced that the South Vietnamese president was the only man in his country who approached peace negotiations rationally and with confidence.

Even as Nixon and Kissinger mulled over a scheme to betray South Vietnam, they reaffirmed their personal commitment to Thieu. They needed the South Vietnamese president, regardless of whether they pursued a decent interval. If South Vietnam was to going to survive, Nixon needed a strong client to lead the war effort. If the war was unwinnable, Nixon still needed a leader who could hold the government in Saigon together until all US troops had withdrawn. The White House did not interfere with the 1970 South Vietnamese Senate elections, which Thieu's supporters lost. While the results did not seem likely to hinder Thieu's capacity to govern, the Nixon administration decided that it had to take a more active role in the 1971 presidential election to ensure that Thieu remained in power.

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<sup>71</sup> Embtel 16458, 12 October 1970, Box 149, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 16726, 16 October 1970, Box 149, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum of Conversation, 17 December 1970, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 223-230 (Document 91).

Thieu, equally determined to stay in power, was not shy about engineering the elections. On 26 January 1970, Thieu told a group of newspaper editors that he did not favor a normal voting process for the 1971 presidential election. Instead, he recommended a two-stage contest. The two leading candidates from the first round of voting would appear on a second run-off ballot. Thieu had only received a plurality in the 1967 election, and he was perhaps worried about receiving even a limited mandate for his next term. A two-stage election, he suggested to the newspaper, would create a government that better reflected the South Vietnamese political environment and prevent a vocal minority from exploiting a split non-communist vote.<sup>72</sup>

Kissinger also thought that Thieu was vulnerable. He speculated in January that Thieu's repression and his employment of a draconian law to stifle the development of new opposition political parties would feed popular resentment. Kissinger predicted that Thieu's critics in Saigon would accuse the government of fraud during and after the 1970 Senate elections. In May, Thieu announced his opposition to neutralist parties and implied that he would rig the elections if such a group entered the contest. Thieu claimed that while there were many political ideologies in South Vietnam, all political parties must advocate for a nationalist struggle against communism. He intended to create conditions

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<sup>72</sup> Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: President Thieu's Recent Remarks on Future Elections, U.S. Troop Presence, and Broadening the Government, 28 January 1970, Box 142, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM. For information on the 1967 presidential election, see Chapter 1.

under which mature political parties could develop, and he did not consider neutralists part of that category.<sup>73</sup>

Thieu's attempts to direct the NSDF to form a composite slate for the Senate elections, however, failed dismally. Thieu had created the NSDF in 1969, hoping to unify South Vietnam's disparate political parties on any policy matters for which there was consensus. He designed the NSDF's predecessor, Lien Minh, to serve as a broad organization encompassing various parties and interest groups, which could expand Thieu's popular base of support. Lien Minh failed, however, and conservative war hawks dominated the NSDF, which not surprisingly lost the 1970 Senate elections.<sup>74</sup>

Half of the South Vietnamese Senate was up for election in 1970 and the White House looked to the results as an indicator of Thieu's popular support. Candidates ran on ten-person national slates. Three slates were elected, for a total of thirty seats. Each voter could nominate three slates for the Senate from the eighteen in the race. Four slates ran in clear opposition to Thieu, the strongest of which was organized by the An Quang Buddhists. The NSDF was not even able to form a unified slate, much to Thieu's disgust, but Kissinger argued that this failure probably protected the South Vietnamese president's prestige. Had the alliance successfully formed a slate and lost the election, Thieu would have suffered a severe blow. Since the remaining strong slates generally supported Thieu, however, he would likely be able to work with the National Assembly in the future. The

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<sup>73</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, January 1969-July 1970, Vol. VI: 980-983 (Document 295); Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Recent Statements by President Thieu, 21 May 1970, Box 146, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>74</sup> For more details on Lien Minh and the NSDF, see Chapter 2.

NSDF's failure also made it easy to dismiss rumors that Thieu had rigged the election, because his own party could not even make it onto the ballot. Thieu's failure to organize a strong slate for the 1970 Senate elections was, to Kissinger's mind, thus quite desirable.<sup>75</sup>

The An Quang Buddhists won the Senate elections, but a generally pro-Thieu slate came in second. The third elected slate was independent, led by Nguyen Van Huyen. Thieu had no direct influence over Huyen, but he respected the senator and welcomed his re-election. Since a Buddhist slate that ran in opposition to Thieu won the election, the South Vietnamese president could not be accused of rigging the contest. Pro-government and opposition forces were now balanced in the full Senate, with independents representing the largest group. Many independents supported Thieu on various issues, so US officials remained confident that he had enough legislative support to lead his country effectively and promote necessary reforms.<sup>76</sup>

After the Senate elections, CIA agent Ted Shackley speculated that Thieu had a fifty percent chance of winning the 1971 presidential election.<sup>77</sup> The Nixon administration wanted to guarantee Thieu's victory. British pacification expert Sir Robert Thompson told Nixon there would be no peace settlement in the near future because the enemy was waiting to see how the 1971 South Vietnamese election or 1972 US election turned out. If

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<sup>75</sup> Embtel 9884, 23 June 1970, Box 147, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Status Report on the South Vietnamese Senate Election, 4 August 1970, Box 148, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>76</sup> Embtel 16036, 3 October 1970, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Status Report on the South Vietnamese Senate Election, 4 August 1970, Box 148, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>77</sup> Memorandum from William Sullivan to Marshall Green: Outlook for the 1971 Presidential Election in South Viet-Nam, 30 September 1970, "Pol 14 Presidential / Lower House Elections – 1971 (1970 File)," Box 9, Lot 74D112, RG 59, NARA.



either government lost support in these contests, Hanoi and the NLF would be in a stronger position at the peace table. Thompson predicted that the NLF would endorse a peace candidate, probably General Duong Van “Big” Minh, who was very popular in South Vietnam. Thompson encouraged Nixon to support Thieu’s re-election, because the incumbent president was much more likely to support Nixon’s agenda in Vietnam: “While avoiding a ‘kiss of death’ the U.S. must indirectly show that [Thieu] is being backed by strongly supporting his constructive policies.” Specifically, Thompson recommended that Washington publicize Thieu’s efforts to secure a peace agreement, rebuild war-torn infrastructure, and develop the South Vietnamese economy.<sup>78</sup>

Even Thieu’s critics were hard-pressed to identify a better candidate for the South Vietnamese presidency. According to former pacification director Robert Komer, the 1971 election threatened to become “the damndest mess we’ve seen since Tet 1968.” Thieu’s very successes, Komer claimed, were helping to create this problem. Advances in the military effort and pacification gave ambitious politicians new opportunities to advance their careers. He also believed that recent political reforms would make it more difficult for Thieu to rig the election. Komer did not share Nixon, Kissinger, and Bunker’s enthusiasm for Thieu, but he judged the other potential candidates as worse. He described Big Minh as a “charming incompetent,” Nguyen Cao Ky as “quite erratic and a

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<sup>78</sup> Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Meeting with Sir Robert Thompson, Undated but probably between 11 and 18 October 1970, Box 82, Folder Not Numbered, WHSF, SMOF, POF, MP, RNLM.

dilettante,” the imprisoned 1967 peace candidate Truong Dinh Dzu as a “demagogic charlatan,” and former Prime Minister Tran Van Huong as too old and sick to govern.<sup>79</sup>

In 1970, the White House decided to support Thieu’s re-election campaign. Even after Nixon started mulling over a decent interval strategy, he needed a strong man in Saigon to remain in power for a brief period after US forces disengaged. While other South Vietnamese politicians sought the presidency, none were considered acceptable in the White House. Thieu technically lost the 1970 Senate elections, but US officials maintained their conviction that he was a strong and effective leader. The results of the presidential election, therefore, were virtually pre-determined; the Nixon administration worked hard in 1971 to make sure that Thieu won a second term.

#### **AN ALLIANCE IN PERIL**

The White House viewed the prospects for South Vietnam as much worse in 1970 than the previous year. The opposition to Thieu in the National Assembly was growing stronger, in part because he acquiesced to American advice regarding economic reforms. His decision to clamp down on the opposition, as he did with Lower House deputy Tran Ngoc Chau, generated outrage on both sides of the Pacific, drawing even Henry Kissinger into discussions about South Vietnamese internal stability. The systemic corruption in South Vietnam seemed to amplify these fears, and Thieu refused to do anything to prevent such criminality.

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Komer, *Trouble Ahead – The 1971 SVN Election Campaign*, 17 December 1970, “Pol 14 – Presidential Election, Jan-Mar 1971,” Box 13, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA.

True, Thieu was not failing on every front. He finally promulgated his land reform bill in March 1970, with the acquiescence of the National Assembly. He also managed to overcome some of the fallout from his 1969 austerity measures by enacting meaningful economic reforms. Even though the Cambodian Incursion flopped, the White House appreciated Thieu's assistance in expanding the war beyond Vietnam's borders. Perhaps his government seemed weaker in 1970 than in 1969, but Thieu's friendly cooperation with American officials allowed him to maintain Nixon's support.

Racism facilitated the Nixon administration's decision to support Thieu, regardless of which strategy the US president pursued. The National Assembly's opposition to American policy recommendations, the historical instability of the government in Saigon, and rampant South Vietnamese corruption contrasted sharply with American impressions of Thieu. The White House appreciated its client's friendly cooperation, and Bunker argued that Thieu was different than the rest of his countrymen. Thieu understood the logic of US recommendations for economic reform, and was too righteous to understand the prevalence of corruption in Saigon. In some ways, therefore, Bunker believed that Thieu thought more like an American than a Vietnamese statesman. While Thieu's treatment of Chau was disturbing, the Nixon administration believed such repression was unavoidable in societies it considered primitive.

The White House's portrayal of Thieu as a South Vietnamese superman reinforced the belief among American officials that only he could promote Nixon's agenda. Whether Thieu was to serve as a staunch ally in a victorious war or a scapegoat for failure after a decent interval had yet to be determined. Whichever course he chose,

though, Nixon needed to make sure that his client won re-election in 1971. Nobody else could be trusted to hold South Vietnam together long enough to protect America's—and Nixon's—prestige.

#### **CHAPTER 4: THE DAMNDEST MESS WE’VE SEEN, 1971**

In 1971, a new rift opened in the US-South Vietnamese alliance, even as Nixon became more devoted to maintaining the Thieu regime. The South Vietnamese presidential election that year was a fiasco, convincing some US officials that the Vietnamese were immature schemers, rather than honorable statesmen. As he focused on rigging that contest, Thieu ignored other policy challenges. The new pacification campaign floundered, but the White House excused Thieu for the lack of meaningful progress. Both the US and South Vietnamese governments had relegated pacification as a priority by 1971.<sup>1</sup> Nixon’s War on Drugs received high priority in the White House, but US officials seemed inclined to forgive Thieu for not actively participating in it. The invasion of Laos proved an unmitigated disaster; ARVN collapsed beneath North Vietnamese military power, despite the benefits of Vietnamization. While his performance was otherwise disheartening, Thieu continued to earn some goodwill from Nixon by reaffirming the White House’s claims that the invasion was successful and continuing to cooperate with troop replacements. Thieu eyed Kissinger with increasing suspicion, however, as he received skeletal details of the negotiations in Paris. While he knew nothing of Nixon and Kissinger’s musings of betrayal, Thieu sent personal emissaries to the United States to determine if America’s commitment was wavering.

Nixon continued to support Thieu because he needed a strongman in Saigon if he decided to pursue a “decent interval” solution to the war. Under such a scheme, Washington would seek a peace settlement that would only sustain South Vietnam long

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<sup>1</sup> Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 142; Prados, *Lost Crusader*, 229, 232-233

enough to preserve American credibility. Thieu seemed most capable of preventing Saigon from collapsing quickly after all US forces had withdrawn, even though his misdeeds were provoking outrage in Congress and the US press. Convinced that he needed to stay the course, Nixon dismissed disturbing news from Saigon. While the US president deemed Thieu an exceptional leader, he was still Vietnamese, and thus less rational, productive, and morally upright than those of American stock. Nixon and Kissinger doubted that Thieu could overcome his alleged ethnic proclivities, but they still believed him superior to the alternatives.

#### **FOUR MORE YEARS**

As Nixon and Kissinger considered pursuing a decent interval, they simultaneously worked to reinforce the Thieu regime, at least in the short term. Facing determined opponents in the 1971 presidential election, Thieu was headed for the kind of vicious campaign that pacification director Robert Komer had envisioned in 1970, when he predicted that the contest would be “the damndest mess we’ve seen since Tet 1968.”<sup>2</sup> The 1971 mess turned out to be partly one of Washington’s making. American officials decided to secretly finance Thieu’s campaign because they considered his opposition incompetent and antithetical to US interests. When Thieu turned the election into an obvious farce by shutting out the opposition candidates, US officials played along. Nixon’s racist perception of Thieu as a South Vietnamese superman helped justify electoral fraud as a tool for maintaining a reliable strongman in South Vietnam.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Komer, *Trouble Ahead – The 1971 SVN Election Campaign*, 17 December 1970, “Pol 14 – Presidential Election, Jan-Mar 1971,” Box 13, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA.

In early January, Thieu told Bunker that he expected support from a broad array of constituencies for his re-election campaign, including the South Vietnamese military, civil service, various religious groups (Catholics, Montagnards, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, Quoc Tu Buddhists), the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor, and others. Thieu's supporters were not unified under a single political banner because both of his earlier attempts to form a broad political alliance of supporters had failed. Lacking the time needed to build a new party before the election, Thieu instead tried to use his government's bureaucracy and the military to reach out to the South Vietnamese polity.<sup>3</sup>

Bunker advocated backing Thieu as the best candidate to support US interests, as the alternatives appeared unacceptable. Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky enjoyed little popular support, and Duong Van "Big" Minh, who had returned from exile in 1968, could not be trusted because the NLF had infiltrated his supporters and urged him to pursue a hasty peace settlement. Bunker advocated for direct American interference in the South Vietnamese contest. By continuing to pursue progress in economic and land reforms, pacification, and Vietnamization, Bunker hoped that US forces and officials could provide Thieu with a record of success that would facilitate his re-election. He also asked Washington to determine whether it could offer Thieu some form of covert assistance. Bunker nonetheless urged the White House to declare itself neutral in the contest, as it did in 1967, for public appearances. During the earlier campaign, of course, many

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<sup>3</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 8 January 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 250-252 (Document 100).

Vietnamese observers interpreted “neutral” as de facto support for the existing government.<sup>4</sup>

Thieu courted White House support for his campaign. During a visit to Saigon by Secretary Laird in January, Thieu requested that Washington delay most of its troop withdrawals until after his re-election. Thieu hoped that if the South Vietnamese felt safer because of the higher US troop presence, they would credit him for protecting the country. He also wanted to bolster South Vietnamese security, and then claim that Washington was only withdrawing its troops because Thieu had personally succeeded in staving off enemy attacks. Laird had not come to Saigon to discuss Vietnamization, but he promised to consider the request because he wanted to avoid an immediate confrontation with Thieu.<sup>5</sup>

In February, the NSC’s 40 Committee approved covert assistance that Bunker had requested to facilitate Thieu’s re-election. Washington re-allocated unused funds for the National Social Democratic Front (NSDF), a failed political alliance Thieu formed in 1969, to a contingency budget for Thieu and Lower House deputies who supported their president in the National Assembly. The Committee even financed a few of Thieu’s opponents in order to gather intelligence on their campaigns and strengthen the moderate

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<sup>4</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 8 January 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 250-252 (Document 100); Robert Brigham, *Guerilla Diplomacy: The NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 96; Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 128. For more information about Bunker’s policy of non-intervention in 1967, see Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> Meeting Between The President, Secretary Rogers, Secretary Laird, Admiral Moorer, Director Helms and Dr. Kissinger, 18 January 1971, Box 83, Folder Not Numbered, WHSF, SMOF, POF, MP, RNLM.



wing of the An Quang Buddhists. The latter effort was hidden from Thieu, who also remained in the dark about which of his supporters the 40 Committee had bribed.<sup>6</sup>

Thieu had a running start in the contest. He and Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem had begun touring South Vietnam in 1970, wooing provincial officials and handing out land titles. The only two serious opposition candidates—Vice President Ky and Big Minh—both faced uphill battles. At the beginning of the year, the US embassy reported that Ky would probably abandon the race for lack of public support. Big Minh still intended to seek the presidency, but Thieu ordered his cronies to follow Minh, tap his phone, and arrest his supporters. Minh threatened to complain to the American press about this harassment, but Thieu dismissed the threat, denigrating his opponent as a perennial procrastinator who would probably not even decide whether to run for the presidency until the very last moment.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his many advantages as the incumbent, Thieu was not guaranteed a victory in the election. On 24 December 1970, John Negroponte predicted that Thieu would win sixty percent of the South Vietnamese vote, with Big Minh taking up the

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<sup>6</sup> Memorandum for the 40 Committee, 3 February 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 351-355 (Document 119). As per footnote 4 of the 40 Committee Memo, the proposal was approved on 4 February 1971. The executive secretary was not present at that meeting, however, so no minutes were taken. A later document, dated 22 October 1971, referenced the meeting.

<sup>7</sup> State Department Ad Hoc Group on Vietnam, Improving the Vietnamese Government: Political and Administrative Performance, 3 February 1971, “VN Ad Hoc Working GRP,” Box 28, Lot 76D431, RG 59, NARA; Embtel 1391, 30 January 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Memorandum of Conversation: Secretary Laird’s Meeting with Ambassador Bunker, 4 February 1971, Box 153, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from Richard Smyser to Kissinger: Dr. Wesley Fishel on the South Vietnamese Elections and Other Subjects, 19 February 1971, Box 153, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 2435, 19 February 1971, Box 153, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

remainder. By April 1971 Negroponte had become less confident of Thieu's victory. First, Ky was keeping his options open, and might yet decide to run. Second, the law governing the election had not yet been ratified. Thieu submitted a bill in 1970 that would require presidential candidates to acquire endorsements from forty members of the Assembly or one-sixth of the provincial and city chairmen. The Lower House passed the bill, but the Senate turned it down. The State Department did not think the bill would ever pass, but the House eventually overrode the Senate's decision with a super-majority vote. The State Department had good reason to doubt in April that the election law would be ratified, though. The stringent nomination requirements were so controversial that Lower House Deputy Nguyen Dac Dan threatened his fellow legislators with a grenade to prevent its passage.<sup>8</sup>

The following month revealed that Negroponte was justified in worrying about Thieu's opposition. When Thieu presided over a parade celebrating the recent "victory" in Laos, Ky gave what *Time* magazine called his "most sulfurous performance since 1968." The vice president ridiculed Thieu's invasion of Laos (discussed below) as South Vietnam's "Dien Bien Phu," a famous battle that led to France's defeat in the First Indochina War. Ky then railed against corruption under Thieu, and sarcastically denounced the warplanes that the South Vietnamese air force had received from the

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<sup>8</sup> Memorandum from John D. Negroponte to Richard Smyser: The 1971 Presidential Elections in South Vietnam, 5 April 1971, Box 153, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 126-128.

United States as suitable only for women. Ky also announced that he wanted all US troops to leave the South Vietnam by late 1972 or early 1973.<sup>9</sup>

Thieu's attempts to compete with Ky stirred up controversy in the US Congress. Ky had earned the support of some South Vietnamese politicians by boasting that he would order an invasion of North Vietnam. Perhaps seeking to steal the support of those hawks from his vice president, and simultaneously put his enemy on edge, Thieu announced his own plans for a northward invasion.<sup>10</sup> Senators Walter Mondale (DFL-MN) and William Saxbe (R-OH) introduced a bill to prohibit US support for a South Vietnamese invasion of the North, a plan the former legislator described as "disturbing."<sup>11</sup> Senator Mike Mansfield (D-MT) also declared himself "unequivocally opposed" to an invasion of the North.<sup>12</sup> Kissinger stated publicly that there were no immediate allied plans for an invasion of the North, but Thieu's ploy had already raised Congressional hackles.<sup>13</sup>

American legislators soon had more reasons to worry about Thieu's re-election campaign. On March 19, the director of the Joint US Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) in Saigon told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that it was spending millions of

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<sup>9</sup> "South Viet Nam: Election Preview," *Time*, 3 May 1971. On the significance of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, see Herring, *America's Longest War*, 33-51; Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds. *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); James Waite, *The End of the First Indochina War: A Global History* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Alvin Shuster, "Thieu, Facing Election, Sees Political Gains in Laos Drive," *New York Times*, 18 March 1971; "The War: Shadowboxing," *Time*, 22 March 1971.

<sup>11</sup> *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 4, S: 4125.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in "Thieu Threatens Attack on North if War Goes On," an editorial added in *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 4, H: 5218-5219.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

dollars to help Thieu promote various government policies in South Vietnam. Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright (D-AR) correctly interpreted JUSPAO's activities as propaganda, and questioned the prospects for South Vietnamese self-determination when Washington was helping Thieu indoctrinate his constituents. Senator Frank Church (D-ID) denounced these activities as "the ultimate corruption."<sup>14</sup> Adlai Stevenson (D-IL) claimed that Bunker had supported Thieu's re-election. Bunker denied the accusation, but both Congress and the press concluded—accurately—that the White House favored Thieu over Minh and Ky. Stevenson introduced a resolution that would have imposed American neutrality in the elections, and added the condition that any government which came to power through electioneering would be denied foreign assistance. Although the resolution failed to pass, it signaled declining Congressional support for the Nixon administration's corrupt client.<sup>15</sup>

As the campaign progressed, Big Minh and Ky gave the White House more reasons to oppose their campaigns. Minh said he did not believe a military victory was in the cards. He rejected a coalition government, as Nixon and Kissinger wanted, but he was too eager to reach a peace settlement. Bunker dismissed Minh as too "soft" to win the war. Ky, on the other hand, was startlingly frenetic on peace issues. He abandoned his call for a northward invasion and began to advocate a negotiated settlement. While the opposition candidates alienated the White House with such statements, Thieu

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<sup>14</sup> *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 7, S: 8325-8339

<sup>15</sup> *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 8, S: 9513-9515; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 10, S: 12792-12800; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 10, S: 12825-12827; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 16, S: 21318-21321; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 17, S: 22021-22022.

demonstrated greater compatibility with Nixon's agenda by sticking firmly to his old principles: peace through strength and the Four No's—no coalition government, no neutralization of South Vietnam, no surrender of land to the enemy, and no communist activity in the South.<sup>16</sup>

Thieu's efforts to reassure his allies that he would seek peace through strength did not prevent Nixon and Kissinger from speculating about what would happen if he lost the election. Nixon questioned the prevailing assumption that South Vietnam would fall apart if Thieu lost the election. In June, he told Kissinger that even if Minh or Ky won the presidency, they would still need to kowtow to Washington, given that all South Vietnamese leaders "live at our sufferance." Kissinger observed that Ky had behaved well during a visit to Washington the previous year, neglecting to mention how many times Ky had embarrassed the White House. Neither American was impressed with Minh, though. They considered him "dumb" and easily manipulated.<sup>17</sup> This idle speculation was more indicative of Nixon's attitudes towards client relations than a wavering commitment to Thieu. The US president held an exaggerated estimation of his control over the South Vietnamese government, and Thieu's cooperation over the last two and a half years had not disabused Nixon of this false sense of power. The US president considered Thieu a loyal ally, but he was expendable, as is evident from Nixon's private ruminations regarding a decent interval.

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<sup>16</sup> Embtel 7109, 9 May 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLN.

<sup>17</sup> Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 12 June 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 718-725 (Document 218).

Bunker did his best to address Saigon's public relations problems. He asked Thieu about rumors of repression, restrictions on the press, the tough nomination requirements for candidacy in the presidential election, and government interference in opposition campaigns. Thieu angrily denied that he was abusing his powers to secure the election. His new press law, he insisted, only prohibited attacks on the personal lives of the candidates and accusations of corruption. In truth, Thieu's government heavily censored the South Vietnamese press and confiscated several newspapers accused of promoting communism, inciting tensions between religious groups, or jeopardizing national security. Thieu also faced allegations that he had jailed Assemblyman Ngo Cong Duc for opposing his election law, which required presidential candidates to acquire endorsements from forty members of the Assembly or one hundred provincial councilors. Thieu claimed that Duc had been arrested for attacking a provincial councilman before the election law vote, though he was not released until the bill passed. Finally, Thieu denied preventing a theater owner from opening his venue for a Ky campaign rally, or ordering the police to disperse a political meeting in support of Big Minh. The South Vietnamese president claimed that Minh's followers had not requested a permit for the meeting, which was therefore illegal. Bunker did not believe Thieu's excuses. The ambassador knew Minh and Ky were corrupt, but Thieu, as the incumbent, had more opportunities to rig the election.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 14, S: 18646; Embtel 9290, 12 June 1971, Box 155, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Peter Osnos, "Thieu Signs Controversial Election Bill Without Change," *Washington Post*, 24 June 1971; Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 156-160. Penniman regards the Thieu regime's conduct as completely

Of these problems, Thieu's election law proved the most serious, because it undermined Washington's public pledge to promote Vietnamese self-determination. Minh and Ky claimed that the nomination requirements were unconstitutionally restrictive, but Thieu assured Bunker that his opponents were working hard to talk or bribe their ways onto the ballot. The Supreme Court could theoretically proclaim the law illegal, but it would need to do so before the first steps of the electoral process began on July 20. If the Court made such a judgment, Thieu promised to comply. Of course, the emergence in 1970 of a strongly pro-Thieu Supreme Court president militated against that possibility. Bunker was not satisfied, and noted that Saigon was suffering for its failure to properly publicize its responses to criticisms of the law.<sup>19</sup>

To sound out the electoral prospects in South Vietnam, Nixon sent Kissinger to Saigon in July. For a time, Nixon considered going himself. Unfortunately, he was too busy to do so before the South Vietnamese campaign season began. He also wanted to avoid making an overt endorsement of Thieu that could backfire. Thieu would look like an American puppet; Big Minh might use the meeting as an excuse to drop out of the race, which would undermine the image of a free contest; and the US Congress would resent Nixon's interference in foreign elections. Some Senators were already trying to legislate an end to the war by attaching amendments to key pieces of legislation.<sup>20</sup>

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justifiable, but he also outlines significant restrictions on the press and many confiscations of newspapers.

<sup>19</sup> Embtel 9290, 12 June 1971, Box 155, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM. For more information about changes in 1970 to the South Vietnamese Supreme Court, see Chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> Conversation Among President Nixon, the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker), and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 16 June 1971, *FRUS*, July

When Kissinger arrived in Saigon, Thieu offered a rosy perspective of the elections. He explained that he was not trying to shut out the opposition with his election law, but to prevent “fantasist candidates” from joining the race. The White House had been complaining about alleged Vietnamese irrationality for years, and Thieu’s comments fed such bigotry. Kissinger’s response to Thieu was telling: since Americans were ignorant about South Vietnamese domestic politics, he “had no personal view” about the fairness of the nomination requirements. Of course the White House wanted a free election, but “the US understood the problem of stability.”<sup>21</sup> In Kissinger’s view, stability was more important than democratic niceties, and unconventional methods were sometimes required to stave off chaos. By demanding only that the elections were conducted fairly—instead of asking for relaxation of the candidacy requirements so Minh and Ky could run—Kissinger may have encouraged Thieu to pursue more draconian measures against his competitors. Since Kissinger did not want to comment extensively on the topic, Thieu was free to interpret “fair elections” as he wished.

Accusations of corruption and electioneering from Ky, Minh, and other Vietnamese critics flourished as the campaign continued. Thieu easily collected the requisite endorsements to qualify for the race, and tried to demonstrate his commitment to democracy by spending forty million piasters to monitor voting procedures. At the end of July, Ky told Deputy Ambassador Samuel Berger that he was having trouble qualifying for the race. If he could not compete, he warned, Big Minh would withdraw, leaving

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1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 727-739 (Document 220); Memorandum of Conversation, 4 July 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 782-798 (Document 231).

<sup>21</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 4 July 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 782-798 (Document 231).



Thieu's re-election uncontested. When Ky threatened to lead a coup under those circumstances, Berger warned that US support for South Vietnam was contingent on the stability of the constitutional government. While he did not admit it to Ky, Berger explained in his report to Washington that he had independent evidence that Thieu was interfering with the vice president's efforts to obtain the necessary endorsements for the election.<sup>22</sup>

Minh and Ky publicly aired their grievances, and their vocal opposition to Thieu fueled Congressional demands for an electoral observer team. The news media lent some support to the opposition candidates. Particularly damning were press reports that Thieu asked South Vietnamese province chiefs to sign blank endorsement forms, which the president's cronies later completed. Under the rules of the new election law, no official qualified to sign such forms could endorse more than one candidate. If a province chief endorsed both Thieu and Ky, for example, the government would invalidate both submissions. Thieu had all the support he needed, but he was able to disqualify Ky by forcing many of the vice president's supporters to sign additional endorsements. Ky had voiced the same allegations in his conversation with Berger, and the deputy ambassador's comment about Thieu's interference seems to verify the accusation. Nguyen Cao Ky's futile campaign for the presidency was finally over.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Embtel 9075, 9 July 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 11152, 15 July 1971, Box 155, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 11670, 23 July 1971, Box 155, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>23</sup> "The World: South Viet Nam: Two Against Thieu," *Time*, 26 July 1971; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 19, H: 25685-25686; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 20, S: 26717-26718; Iver Peterson, "South Vietnam: The Short-Lived Campaign of Mr. Ky," *New York Times*, 8 August 1971.

The White House was less than enthusiastic with Thieu's ploy to ensure his election. Rogers thought that forcing Ky out of the race had been a big mistake, and even Kissinger had to agree. Unfortunately, Thieu was determined to eliminate his competition. In August, Minh presented Bunker and Berger with a document that allegedly contained instructions from Thieu to junior government officials about how to rig the election. American investigators concluded that most of the document was genuine, but argued that using government resources for his campaign did not constitute fraud. Minh warned Bunker and Berger that he might drop out of the race, leaving Thieu with no competition, and then released the document to both the British ambassador and Vietnamese press.<sup>24</sup>

When the American news media picked up stories of Thieu's electioneering, Kissinger attempted to preserve the façade of South Vietnamese democracy. He explained to Rogers that Bunker needed to convince the South Vietnamese president to ensure that the election at least appeared free and fair.<sup>25</sup> On August 19, however, Big Minh withdrew from the race. No longer facing Rogers, Kissinger proved less critical of America's

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<sup>24</sup> Conversation with William Rogers, 5:25 PM, 10 August 1971, Box 11, Folder: "2-10 Aug 1971," HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM; Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 12 August 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 867-870 (Document 243); Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Big Minh's Election Fraud Document, 24 August 1971, Box 156, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>25</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 12 August 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 867-870 (Document 243); Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Big Minh's Election Fraud Document, 24 August 1971, Box 156, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; "Thieu Declares Ky Slanders South Vietnam's Institutions," *New York Times*, 14 August 1971; "Thieu is Accused of Voting-Card Fraud," *New York Times*, 15 August 1971; "South Viet Nam: And Then There Were Two," *Time*, 16 August 1971; "The Vietnamese Elections," *Wall Street Journal*, 16 August 1971; Conversation with William Rogers, 3:27 PM, 17 August 1971, Box 11, Folder: "11-19 Aug 1971," HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM.

strongman. Thieu might have been unwise to dissuade Minh and Ky from running, Kissinger admitted, but he believed that communist and Buddhist forces had also tried to rig the election against the South Vietnamese president. The national security adviser did not elaborate on this serious allegation, but—as mentioned above—the NLF had infiltrated Big Minh’s camp. Kissinger recommended keeping silent about Minh’s withdrawal. Above all else, he told Nixon, the White House must not turn on Thieu. Nixon concurred: “Turn on him? Never, never... No, we must never do that. It’s like what they did killing Diem.” Kissinger accused the State Department of wanting to betray Thieu and Nixon became agitated: “Never. Never, never, never. They’re to shut up. They’re to say nothing without my approval.” Kissinger noted that it might be possible to postpone the contest and seek a new, less stringent election law, but Nixon was tired of the controversy and ordered the problem solved immediately.<sup>26</sup>

It rankled Kissinger that Thieu had forced Ky out of the race.<sup>27</sup> Venting his frustration to *LA Times* reporter David Kraslow, the national security advisor joked that Thieu was “his own worst enemy, so he may wind up beating himself.” While the national security adviser agreed with the premise behind the election law—eliminating the so-called “fantasist” candidates—he believed that forcing Ky out of the race was

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<sup>26</sup> Transcript of a Telephone Conversation between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 19 August 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 881-882 (Document 248). Historian Robert Brigham argues that the NLF pressured Big Minh to withdraw as a diplomatic ploy, after concluding that Nixon would not abandon Thieu. See Brigham, *Guerilla Diplomacy*, 99-100.

<sup>27</sup> Conversation with William Rogers, 9:53 AM, 19 August 1971, Box 11, Folder: “11-19 Aug 1971,” HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLN.

politically inconvenient.<sup>28</sup> Kissinger also privately condescended to Thieu, calling him a “dope” for allowing “vultures” to attack him when he had done nothing wrong.<sup>29</sup>

There was a faint glimmer of hope when Thieu agreed to validate Ky’s candidacy without the required number of endorsements. The Supreme Court agreed to accept Ky’s candidacy, but the vice president refused to participate in a rigged election.<sup>30</sup> Nixon and Kissinger scurried to devise an appropriate response to the uncontested election. Kissinger told Bunker, “we cannot let candidates who may be objectively weak overthrow their opponent merely by withdrawing from an election they could not win.” A free election, however, would secure Thieu’s legitimacy in Vietnam and help assuage US critics of Nixon’s Vietnam policy. Kissinger recommended that Thieu transform the election into a plebiscite, or in other words, a public vote of confidence in the government. He could justify this move by claiming that he had wanted a fair election, but his opponents had made that impossible. Since he was committed to South Vietnamese self-determination, he would abide by the voting results. For this approach to

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<sup>28</sup> Conversation with Dave Kraslow, 1:00 PM, 20 August 1971, Box 11, Folder: “20-31 Aug 1971,” HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLN.

<sup>29</sup> Conversation with Ron Ziegler, 2 September 1971, Box 11, Folder: “1-10 Sept 1971,” HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLN.

<sup>30</sup> Conversation with President Nixon, 20 August 1971, Box 11, Folder: “20-31 Aug 1971,” HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLN; Backchannel Message From the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 20 August 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 882-883 (Document 249); Craig R. Whitney, “Ky Leaves Race Despite U.S. Plea: Suggests He and Thieu Both Resign and Leave Interim Regime to Run Election,” *New York Times*, 23 August 1971. The Supreme Court’s reinstatement of Ky in the race was based on a decision that Thieu could not gather endorsements from both the National Assembly and provincial and municipal officials. The Court accepted Thieu’s endorsements from the Assembly, and invalidated the others. The Court was then able to accept some of Ky’s previously rejected endorsements, and authorize him to run for the presidency. See Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 131.

work, Kissinger advised, Thieu would need to give Minh and Ky opportunities and resources to campaign against the confidence vote, including free airtime and possibly even government helicopters.<sup>31</sup>

Bunker had grave doubts about the Nixon-Kissinger plan to hold a plebiscite because Minh and Ky could boycott the referendum, triggering yet another political firestorm. Secretary Rogers proposed a contingency plan, wherein Thieu resigned and a caretaker government administered a new election.<sup>32</sup> Kissinger rejected Rogers' plan on the grounds that government policymaking would fall apart in the interim. South Vietnam, Kissinger insisted, did not need a free and fair election: "what Thieu did is not as outrageous in Vietnamese terms as it is in American terms."<sup>33</sup> Rogers understood that Washington could not chart South Vietnam's political future and, by September 1, had accepted the referendum option.<sup>34</sup>

With Washington's approval, Thieu announced the referendum to his people on September 2. He used the occasion to deny allegations that the contest was rigged, saying that Minh and Ky had the right to terminate their campaigns. Secretary Rogers told the

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<sup>31</sup> Backchannel Message From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker), 23 August 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 886-888 (Document 251).

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Vietnam Elections – The Contingency Options, 24 August 1971, Box 156, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Deptel 154630, 23 August 1971, Box 156, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Deptel 155704, 25 August 1971, Box 156, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from John Negroponte to Kissinger: State Options Paper on Vietnam Elections, 27 August 1971, Box 156, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Conversation with William Rogers, 30 August 1971, Box 11, Folder: "20-31 Aug 1971," HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM

<sup>33</sup> Conversation with William Rogers, 30 August 1971, Box 11, Folder: "20-31 Aug 1971," HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM.

<sup>34</sup> Conversation with William Rogers, 1 September 1971, Box 11, Folder: "1-10 Sept 1971," HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM.

American press that the White House had hoped for a contested election, and Thieu regretted that he was unable to produce one. These attempts at damage control failed miserably. Reports circulated that Bunker had tried to bribe Minh and Ky into renewing their campaigns. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak of the *Washington Post* noted that US advisers had ceased to give Thieu unfettered praise, indicating a fair degree of official revulsion as well. Congressional doves railed against Thieu's mockery of democracy. Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D-WA) declared that Congress would withhold future aid to Saigon unless there was a competitive election.<sup>35</sup>

The backlash worried John Holdridge, who wrote that Thieu needed to outline clear election mechanics to avoid further allegations of corruption.<sup>36</sup> To assuage domestic critics, Kissinger proposed sending a telegram to Saigon urging Thieu to give Minh and Ky opportunities to campaign. Nixon downplayed these concerns: "A choice on the ballot

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<sup>35</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 2 September 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 890-891 (Document 253); Secretary Rogers' News Conference, 3 September 1971, "Press Conferences, 1971," Box 2, Lot 73D443, RG 59, NARA; Gloria Emerson, "Buddhist Monks Quietly Lead Campaign Against Thieu," *New York Times*, 3 September 1971; "The World: South Viet Nam's Fifth No," *Time*, 6 September 1971; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Thieu: Politics vs. the War," *Washington Post*, 12 September 1971; Alvin Shuster, "Thieu's Election: How to Make Sure You're the People's Choice," *New York Times*, 12 September 1971; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Thieu: Politics vs. the War," *Washington Post*, 12 September 1971; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 24, H: 31324; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 24, H: 31335-31336; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 24, S: 31345-31349; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 24, S: 31430-31433; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 24, H: 31785-31786; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 24, H: 32130; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 24, S: 32291-32298; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 25, H: 33406; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: VN Election Developments, 11 September 1971, Box 157, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLN.

<sup>36</sup> Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: VN Election Developments, 11 September 1971, Box 157, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLN.

is more important than their chance to campaign -- vote for Thieu or vote no.”<sup>37</sup> On September 16, Nixon directed the media to consider the 1970 National Assembly elections, where one third of the elected candidates opposed Thieu. Some of them said before voting day that they could not be elected, because the contest was rigged. Nixon acknowledged that South Vietnamese democracy was imperfect, but did not believe the Thieu regime was the brutal dictatorship depicted in the press. He refused to impose an American solution to the uncontested election on Thieu. His primary objective was to withdraw American troops as soon as the communist threat subsided, and he would not be distracted by lesser concerns.<sup>38</sup>

Despite Thieu’s controversial behavior, senior US policymakers remained firmly devoted to maintaining his regime. Kissinger was less concerned about the status of South Vietnamese democracy than about the election’s interference in the peace negotiations. If the election had taken place “anytime other than at the climax of Vietnamization,” he argued, Saigon would have remained stable. Instead, Kissinger found Hanoi emboldened by its enemy’s apparent weakness.<sup>39</sup> Bunker was deeply disappointed in Thieu, arguing that the South Vietnamese president’s conduct had been worse than Ky’s or Minh’s. The ambassador doubted that Saigon would face serious instability as a result of the

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<sup>37</sup> Conversation with President Nixon, 14 September 1971, Box 11, Folder: “11-17 Sept 1971,” HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLN.

<sup>38</sup> State Department Briefing Paper: U.S. Assistance to Viet-Nam and the Vietnamese Presidential Elections (Excerpts from President Nixon’s Press Conference, September 16, 1971), Undated, “Pol 2 – Briefing Papers,” Box 12, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA

<sup>39</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 18 September 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 918-928 (Document 257).

uncontested contest, but he predicted that Thieu would only receive a limited mandate.<sup>40</sup>

The State Department nonetheless intended to continue supporting Thieu. Secretary Rogers, one of Thieu's most outspoken critics in the White House, argued that there was simply no acceptable alternative candidate for the presidency. Washington was a co-conspirator in this uncontested election, and now had to accept the consequences. Nixon concurred, insisting that, "the only one there who can run the country is Thieu." The president ordered the NSC to exercise "discipline" in maintaining a productive relationship with Thieu.<sup>41</sup>

On 3 October 1971, the electorate of South Vietnam went to the polls. Given that the outcome was inevitable, most observers have condemned this mockery of democracy.<sup>42</sup> Congressional doves denounced the contest as a sham, and Ky expressed a similar sentiment after the war. Hawks defended Thieu, though, and the American press was not universally negative. John Rarick (D-LA) insisted that Thieu's critics made him immensely popular, because South Vietnamese voters resented American commentary on their affairs. Bob Dole (R-KS) condemned Thieu's critics for trying to impose American

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<sup>40</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 929-930 (Document 258).

<sup>41</sup> Memorandum for the Record, 20 September 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 931-946 (Document 259).

<sup>42</sup> See, for example: Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 319; Ambrose, *The Triumph of a Politician*, 505; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 271-276; Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 87.



democratic values on another country. William Colby blamed Big Minh for abandoning the election, and Kissinger doubted the significance of elections in wartime Vietnam.<sup>43</sup>

Most observers had little doubt that the election was rigged at all levels. Only the bravest South Vietnamese citizen dared reject Thieu. Voting took place under military and police supervision. To prevent a boycott of the election, the government only distributed food allotments to people bearing stamped voter cards. Consequently, Thieu received ninety-four percent of the vote, with eighty-eight percent of eligible voters turning out.<sup>44</sup> Bunker vented his frustrations about the election in a letter to his wife: “If all the individuals concerned—Thieu, Minh and Ky—had had a little more patriotism and less concern with face and pride, a contested election reasonably well run could have been held.” Thieu had missed an opportunity to set the “country on the path of democracy” and “become a great man in the history of Vietnam.” Kissinger, however, reminded Bunker that there was to be no public criticism of the referendum. Any member

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<sup>43</sup> CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 26, S: 34597; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 26, H: 34848; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 27, H: 35082-35084; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 27, H: 35333; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 28, H: 36557-36558; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 27, H: 35089-35090; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 27, S: 35235-35249; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 27, H: 35544; Joseph Kraft, “Thieu’s Ironical Victory,” *Washington Post*, 5 October 1971; Gloria Emerson, “‘We Have to Choose Least of the Bad,’ Professor Says,” *New York Times*, 3 October 1971; Ky, *Twenty Years and Twenty Days*, 193-194; Colby with McCargar, *Lost Victory*, 317; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1032-1035.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Kann, “Thieu Demonstrates Efficiency—At Least in Getting Re-Elected: Vietnamese Troop to the Polls, Some of Them Resentfully; A Drink & a Little White Lie,” *Wall Street Journal*, 4 October 1971; “The World: The Making of the President,” *Time*, 11 October 1971; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 26, H: 34848; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: President Thieu’s Inauguration Speech, 1 November 1971, Box 158, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 147.

of the Country Team that did not support this policy would be removed. Bunker resigned himself to the outcome with the observation that “we tend to expect too much from underdeveloped countries, especially where we are heavily involved.”<sup>45</sup>

With the contest finally over, Washington convinced itself that South Vietnam was once again stable. A post-election State Department report indicated that Thieu could not be unseated by anything short of a coup or a peace settlement that required his resignation. While the uncontested election raised some hackles in Saigon, his re-election demonstrated that he remained firmly in control. The South Vietnamese Senate turned down a motion to investigate the election, though by a narrow margin, and the Supreme Court validated the results. Ky stepped down from the vice presidency on October 31.<sup>46</sup>

At his inauguration, Thieu spoke of democratic development, achieving a real and lasting peace, national self-reliance, and political unity.<sup>47</sup> The Nixon administration denied exercising influence over the election, and managed to keep secret that Thieu had used American assets to mobilize his campaign. That Thieu had managed his competition inelegantly did not unduly disturb Nixon and Kissinger, whose primary concern was to maintain a strongman in Saigon who could govern the unruly South Vietnamese.

Everyone in the Nixon administration accepted Thieu as the only suitable candidate.

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<sup>45</sup> Schaffer, *Ellsworth Bunker*, 234-235. Brackets added by Howard Schaffer.

<sup>46</sup> State Department Memorandum: Viet-Nam – Current Political Situation, 20 October 1971, “Pol 2 – Briefing Papers,” Box 12, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA; State Department Briefing Paper: Issues and Talking Points, 22 October 1971, “Pol 2 – Briefing Papers,” Box 12, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA; State Department Briefing Paper: Status of Nguyen Cao Ky, 22 October 1971, “Pol 2 – Briefing Papers,” Box 12, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA.

<sup>47</sup> “S. Vietnam Inaugurates President,” *Washington Post*, 31 October 1971; Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: President Thieu’s Inauguration Speech, 1 November 1971, Box 158, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

## **HIJACKED POLICIES**

As Thieu dodged criticism over his conduct in the election, he allowed other policies to fall to the wayside. The pacification campaign's floundering progress, for example, seemed to prove that South Vietnamese officials could not manage their affairs unless Thieu personally supervised them. The South Vietnamese president therefore appeared as the only man in the country capable of achieving results. Convinced that Thieu was the sole foundation of South Vietnamese stability, US officials also ignored his efforts to derail Nixon's War on Drugs. Even though Thieu failed to lead his government successfully through either policy challenge, he maintained the support of the White House.

Richard Nixon relegated pacification as a priority after 1970, a process that was mirrored in South Vietnamese administrative changes. The Phoenix Program, for example, had lost much of its personnel by 1971 as a result of Vietnamization. In the summer of 1970, Saigon demonstrated its wavering interest in that project, as well, by moving the Phung Hoang portfolio from Prime Minister Kiem's office to the National Police. Ambassador Bunker, however, remained dedicated to pacification. In early January 1971, he reminded Washington that the Cambodian Incursion of 1970 had forced Hanoi and the NLF to adopt a protracted war strategy. Bunker predicted that the fighting in South Vietnam would remain low key, although he could not say the same about

Cambodia.<sup>48</sup> Despite the ambassador's concerns, the White House's disinterest in the matter protected Thieu's reputation when the pacification campaign faltered.

The 1970 pacification program had been an improved version of the 1969 campaign. While the Incursion and various political and economic matters distracted Saigon from the effort, Bunker reported progress in all regions except Military Region (MR) II. He wrote that Saigon was aware of this vulnerability, and that the enemy would compromise security anywhere the government failed to act appropriately. The 1971 "Community Defense and Local Development Plan" included provisions to improve internal security by strengthening the National Police, improving the Phoenix Program, rallying public support for the government, and reinvigorating local economic and social initiatives. The Regional and Popular Forces grew stronger in 1970, but some units were now becoming complacent. Bunker wanted Thieu to look into this problem before the militia suffered further losses.<sup>49</sup>

The State Department's Ad Hoc Group on Vietnam concurred with Bunker that Thieu needed to provide personal leadership for pacification in 1971. Thieu's interest in the matter had made a real difference in 1969, but now he was neglecting Phung Hoang, which became ineffective without guidance from Independence Palace. In 1969, moreover, Thieu substantially improved the stability of his country by firing ineffective province chiefs. The Ad Hoc Group wanted him to take similar action against inept police

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<sup>48</sup> Embtel 1391, 30 January 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 142; Prados, *Lost Crusader*, 229, 232-233.

<sup>49</sup> Embtel 1391, 30 January 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

chiefs in 1971. Absent Thieu's personal supervision, the Ad Hoc Group believed, junior officials failed to achieve significant results.<sup>50</sup>

Thieu opened the 1971 pacification campaign in early March by emphasizing his personal interest in the initiative during meetings with South Vietnamese commanders and province chiefs. He thus met American demands to lead the charge, though his policies were eyed with suspicion in the United States. On April 20, Representative Robert Drinan (D-MA) rebuked Thieu for planning to increase the number of South Vietnamese police, censoring the press, and using American funds to house political prisoners.<sup>51</sup> He connected the pacification program very directly to Saigon's police state.

The South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, described below, diverted Saigon's security forces and hindered the pacification effort.<sup>52</sup> Terrorism in MR I reached its highest levels since the Tet Offensive, as enemy units tried to take advantage of the distraction. Two provincial capitals suffered particularly grievous losses, but the insurgents were unable to divert forces from the larger military operation. In MR II, pacification stalled under heavy attacks. Bunker reported that ARVN was holding out against the enemy, but was unable to turn the tide of the battle. In MRs III and IV,

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<sup>50</sup> State Department Ad Hoc Group on Vietnam, Improving the Vietnamese Government: Political and Administrative Performance, 3 February 1971, "VN Ad Hoc Working GRP," Box 28, Lot 76D431, RG 59, NARA.

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum from Lars H. Hyde to Mr. Engle: Assessment of 1970 Supplementary Pacification and Development Campaign (November 1970 – February 1971), 31 March 1971, "Pol 23 – Monthly Status Reports, 1971," Box 15, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 9, H: 11073. American funding for prisons and public safety rose from \$20 to \$30 million between 1970 and 1971.

<sup>52</sup> See the discussion on Operation Lam Son 719 below.

Thieu's forces were more successful. The NLF struggled to recruit new members in these regions, and faced significant supply and logistics challenges.<sup>53</sup>

Bunker placed too much faith in Thieu's pacification campaign. According to historian David W.P. Elliott, Saigon's control of the Mekong Delta peaked in 1971 because American bombing had depopulated the insurgents' rural strongholds. Fewer peasants may have supported the NLF, but that did not mean they were in Saigon's corner. Indeed, the drama of the presidential elections threatened to alienate the South Vietnamese public. It is difficult to know, moreover, what proportion of pacification gains were the product of Thieu's guidance. While cross-border operations in Laos may have diverted North Vietnamese and insurgent resources, the same was true for South Vietnamese forces. American pacification statistics, particularly those in the Hamlet Evaluation Survey, were also misleading. Pacification officials often based their conclusions more on personal hunches than substantive evidence, and failed to collect information that might have put the government's control over certain regions in doubt. Since the NLF was conserving its forces, it was only reasonable to expect lower levels of violence.<sup>54</sup>

In July, the fighting in MR II remained tense, but Bunker claimed that the other regions were more secure. The Chieu Hoi program was producing fewer defectors from the NLF, but Bunker interpreted the lower yields as a sign of the project's success. As the

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<sup>53</sup> Embtel 7109, 9 May 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>54</sup> Embtel 7109, 9 May 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Edward P. Metzner, *More than a Soldier's War: Pacification in Vietnam* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 155-156; Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, Vol. 2, 1126-1128, 1182, 1211-1217; Prados, *Lost Crusader*, 205, 230; Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, 259-260.

NLF lost marginal support among broad segments of the population, it relied increasingly on a fanatical core. As such, there were simply fewer insurgents with wavering loyalties for Chieu Hoi officials to recruit. Phung Hoang continued to flounder, but Saigon was trying to shift control of that program from the military to the South Vietnamese police, who were supposed to operate under more stringent legal guidelines as attorneys took over prosecutions of captives. This transformation was supposed to grant Phung Hoang greater legitimacy. Bunker thus portrayed the relegation of this pacification program to a lower echelon of the government as a positive evolution of South Vietnamese democracy. The drawback, of course, was that the program was no longer on the desk of senior South Vietnamese officials. Still, Bunker thought the government was slowly beating back the enemy.<sup>55</sup>

While Embassy Saigon was satisfied with the military aspects of Thieu's pacification effort, South Vietnamese political developments continued to inflame public dissent. In the fall, the NSC sent a team headed by General Alexander Haig to assess the status of South Vietnam. The team concluded that the government faced no serious threat over the election in progress, but major reforms were needed to broaden Thieu's base of popular support and more effectively combat corruption. Thieu continued to alienate the public by arresting dissidents, and the northern regions of the country remained vulnerable to enemy attacks. During the visit, Haig impressed upon Thieu the need for swift action to mobilize greater numbers of South Vietnamese soldiers, improve the quality of ARVN's military leadership, and increase the wages of combat soldiers to

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<sup>55</sup> Embtel 9075, 9 July 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

improve morale. Thieu was ready to shore up his northernmost defenses by launching pre-emptive strikes into Cambodia to secure MR III and sending reinforcements to MR I. While he had no plan to bolster MR II, which was most vulnerable, he agreed to replace a particularly inept commander there.<sup>56</sup>

Thieu achieved little with his 1971 pacification program. Most of his limited attention was directed at security measures, but political efforts to rally public support were probably more necessary, given the presidential campaigns and the outcry over Saigon's repression. The benefits of security initiatives were dubious, as enemy attacks intensified in the northern parts of the country. Despite these warning signs, US officials remained optimistic about the pacification effort. Bunker was pleased with the security measures and the State Department expected Thieu would improve the pacification after the election, when he had more time to supervise South Vietnamese officials.<sup>57</sup>

The White House also spun Thieu's poor performance in the War on Drugs as productive and helpful. The Nixon administration's program to combat narcotics trafficking was hardly unprecedented. The Johnson administration took some steps to combat substance abuse and smuggling, including offering the South Vietnamese National Police anti-narcotics training. Escalating demands in the United States forced

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<sup>56</sup> Memorandum from Haig to Kissinger: Southeast Asia Trip, 27 September 1971, Box 157, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 28, S: 36676-36677; Embtel 17666, 7 November 1971, Box 158, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 9075, 9 July 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

<sup>57</sup> State Department Ad Hoc Group on Vietnam, Improving the Vietnamese Government: Political and Administrative Performance, 3 February 1971, "VN Ad Hoc Working GRP," Box 28, Lot 76D431, RG 59, NARA; State Department Briefing Paper: Issues and Talking Points, 22 October 1971, "Pol 2 – Briefing Papers," Box 12, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA; State Department Briefing Paper: Viet-Nam: The Narcotics Problem, 23 October 1971, "Pol 2 – Briefing Papers," Box 12, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA.



Nixon to take further steps in 1971. In addition, he hoped he could partially repair Thieu's damaged reputation by presenting him as a moral crusader against a great social problem.<sup>58</sup> Thieu could not fully cooperate with the War on Drugs without destabilizing his government because so many South Vietnamese officials—including, allegedly, Thieu—participated in the drug trade. He gave his benefactors a few public spectacles before the media, however, and pretended he was meeting their basic expectations.

The US War on Drugs evolved out of a conservative backlash against the American hippie counterculture and broader security concerns about the predominance of drug abuse in the armed forces. Historian Jeremy Kuzmarov claims that marijuana was both prolific and cheap in Vietnam, but domestic fears about an intoxicated army were exaggerated. According to various military studies, only 35 percent of US soldiers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one used marijuana, and few were getting high every day or during combat operations. United States Representatives Morgan Murphy (D-ILL) and Robert Steele (R-CT), however, claimed that between 10 and 15 percent of American soldiers were addicted to high-grade heroin. After the scholar Alfred McCoy revealed that the CIA was involved in the global drug trade, Democrats and Republicans demanded that the government take steps to restrict substance abuse at home and abroad.<sup>59</sup>

On 17 June 1971, Nixon declared a War on Drugs. He invested heavily in domestic law enforcement and treatment programs, and authorized training programs for

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<sup>58</sup> Jeremy Kuzmarov, "From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency: Vietnam and the International War on Drugs," *The Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 20, no. 3 (2008): p. 344-378, pp. 345, 349.

<sup>59</sup> Kuzmarov, "From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency," p. 345-357.

police in the Golden Triangle (South Vietnam, Laos, and northern Thailand). Nixon ordered the destruction and replacement of crops used to manufacture drugs, and initiated Operation Golden-Flow, a urinalysis and rehabilitation program for US soldiers. Nixon designed the War on Drugs not only to silence his domestic critics but also to protect Vietnamization. By forcing Saigon to create its own anti-narcotics campaign, Nixon hoped to improve Thieu's reputation at home and abroad. With luck, Saigon's strongman would be in a strong position as US forces withdrew.<sup>60</sup>

Bunker was dedicated to the anti-narcotics campaign, particularly since several South Vietnamese officials had been accused of trading heroin. On May 3, he and General Creighton Abrams urged Thieu to join the War on Drugs. The following day, Thieu instructed Prime Minister Khiem and several senior advisers to devise a plan within a week to combat the drug trade. Thieu fueled the ambassador's hopes by promising to personally lead the campaign and ordering consultations between South Vietnamese agencies and the US Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD). Khiem also gave assurances that Saigon would take the War on Drugs seriously. While the ambassador might have been pleased by such promises, he—along with General Abrams

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<sup>60</sup> Kuzmarov, "From Counter-Insurgency to Narco-Insurgency," p. 345-363. For more information on the international dimensions of the War on Drugs, see: Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009); Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 103, 273-278; Alfred W. McCoy, "Heroin as a Global Commodity: A History of Southeast Asia's Opium Trade," in *War on Drugs: Studies in the Failure of U.S. Narcotics Policy*, edited by Alfred W. McCoy and Alan A. Block, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 237-279, particularly p. 260-264; and Cornelius Friesendorf, *US Foreign Policy and the War on Drugs: Displacing the Cocaine and Heroin Industry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

and BNDD Director John Ingersoll—threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with Saigon if Thieu did not join the anti-drug effort.<sup>61</sup>

When little happened over the next month, Bunker pressed Thieu to better publicize his anti-drug efforts, and to order South Vietnamese corps commanders, province chiefs, and police officers to clamp down on the drug trade. Bunker also wanted the government to start handing out stiffer sentences for drug violations. Thieu agreed with Bunker's assessment and promised to curb drug smuggling through Tan Son Nhut Airport by replacing the director, deputy director of customs, and chief of the fraud repression service.<sup>62</sup>

Nixon had intended to discuss the War on Drugs with Thieu in person, but he was forced to cancel his plans for a state visit because of the presidential election. When Bunker returned to Washington in June, Nixon ordered him to put drugs at the top of the agenda in Vietnam. Congress was deliberating the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, which would require the withdrawal of all US troops from South Vietnam by the end of 1971. Nixon worried that some legislators would vote for the amendment solely because they were unsatisfied with progress in the War on Drugs.<sup>63</sup> Under significant American

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<sup>61</sup> "South Viet Nam: Another Sort of H-Bomb," *Time*, 19 April 1971; Embtel 7109, 9 May 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 7182, 10 May 1971, Box 154, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 131-132

<sup>62</sup> Embtel 9291, June 1971 [Exact Date Unknown], Box 155, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>63</sup> Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), 15 June 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 726-727 (Document 219); Conversation Among President Nixon, the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker), and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 16 June 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 727-739

pressure, Thieu fired Major-General Ngo Dzu, the “chief trafficker” in South Vietnamese narcotics as a token gesture. As NBC correspondent Phil Brady noted, the removal of Dzu was unlikely to achieve much of significance, given that Thieu and Ky were themselves allegedly smuggling drugs.<sup>64</sup>

To convince the White House that he was cooperating with the War on Drugs, Thieu made a show of designating a team of five officials under General Dang Van Quang to develop an anti-narcotics program. He also established inter-ministerial committees to discuss the problem at the national and provincial levels. Saigon tightened security and replaced all customs, military, and police personnel at Tan Son Nhut Airport. American customs advisers arrived in Vietnam to train their South Vietnamese counterparts, and the South Vietnamese National Police expanded their Narcotics Section. A new law prohibited pharmacies from selling drugs without prescriptions, and all US military personnel were banned from such establishments. New US regulations also stipulated that American forces could not attend bars and restaurants that sold narcotics. Saigon initiated a media campaign to educate the public about the hazards of addiction, and arrested more than 350 drug peddlers. In July, authorities seized large quantities of heroin, opium, and other substances. Bunker reported that American and South Vietnamese officials were working in close concert on the War on Drugs.<sup>65</sup>

To counter allegations that Thieu, Ky, and Quang were involved with drugs, Thieu introduced a bill to the National Assembly that established the death sentence for

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(Document 220); Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 293-294.

<sup>64</sup> “Thieu, Ky Linked to Drug Trade,” *Washington Post*, 16 June 1971.

<sup>65</sup> Embtel 9075, 9 July 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

convicted drug dealers. He also slashed Quang's authority, relegating power to Admiral Chung Tan Cang in Prime Minister Tran Van Huong's office. Still, Thieu's efforts were half-hearted. Cang was also allegedly involved in the opium trade, and while Thieu expressed interest in winning the War on Drugs, he lost momentum during the electoral campaign. The State Department predicted that further US pressure would be required before Saigon confronted longer-term problems with the War on Drugs, such as police and government corruption. While the State Department was impressed with Thieu's performance, it did not trust junior officials to manage complex problems without his personal attention. General Quang was notoriously corrupt, and probably a drug trafficker. Firing him could prove difficult for Thieu, who would lose a key supporter in the government. Quang was also a CIA informant, so his termination would remove a key source of US intelligence. The White House was clearly not interested in removing all senior officials that participated in the drug trade, anyway, because it never investigated the allegations against Thieu. With the presidential election over, the State Department hoped that Thieu would remove some ineffective officials and mobilize support for the anti-narcotics campaign.<sup>66</sup>

Even though the War on Drugs failed badly, the Nixon administration's support for Thieu did not waver. Kuzmarov argues that both the State Department and CIA have

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<sup>66</sup> Alvin Shuster, "Thieu Denounces N.B.C. Drug Charge: Says Report He Is Tied to Trafficking Is Shocking," *New York Times*, 18 July 1971; "Thieu Denies Drug Charge, Warns Newsmen," *Washington Post*, 18 July 1971; "Thieu Submits Tough Narcotics Bill," *Washington Post*, 11 August 1971; State Department Briefing Paper: Viet-Nam: The Narcotics Problem, 23 October 1971, "Pol 2 – Briefing Papers," Box 12, Lot 74D481, RG 59, NARA; Embtel 907, 1 January 1972, Box 158, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Friesendorf, *US Foreign Policy and the War on Drugs*, 62-63; Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 132, 142-143; Snepp, *Decent Interval*, 13-14.

traditionally been in conflict with US drug enforcement personnel over the protection of client dictators. State Department officials did not promote the black market in drugs, but nor did they make a serious effort to destroy it. The War on Drugs was useful as a propaganda tool, but it was never strictly enforced. Nixon could certainly be pleased with his new political weapon. In October 1972, Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern declared the War on Drugs a failure. Thieu's arrests allowed Nixon to rebut the senator's accusations, and claim that his anti-narcotics policies were effective.<sup>67</sup>

There was also an element of racism in the Nixon administration's reactions to Saigon's lackluster performance in the War on Drugs. In 1973, BNDD Director Ingersoll argued before a Congressional committee that his efforts had failed because of "a cultural problem" in Vietnam. He insisted that, "entire cultures are not changed overnight."<sup>68</sup> Thieu had provided Nixon with enough material to present himself as a great social crusader, and the South Vietnamese drug problem could be dismissed as yet another sign of a weak and inferior society.

## VIETNAMIZATION

The election season may have distracted Thieu from several other issues, but he remained anxious about Vietnamization. Washington tried to console its ally, and even delayed troop withdrawals until after the election to appease him. Thieu remained suspicious of the Nixon administration's intentions, however, worrying that the White House would abandon the vulnerable South Vietnamese. Since he could not halt the

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<sup>67</sup> Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 125, 143-144.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army*, 143. Kuzmarov points to a "patronizing attitude" among US officials "toward Southeast Asian cultures."

eventual departure of all US troops, Thieu continued to lobby for greater financial assistance to strengthen the RVNAF.

When Secretary Laird visited Saigon in January, Thieu expressed concern about reports that Washington would remove all of its troops by 1972 and that Vietnamization would be influenced by domestic US political factors. Thieu estimated that ARVN could probably manage 150,000 to 175,000 withdrawals, but it would be best to delay them until after the election. Thieu hoped to take personal credit for facilitating withdrawals by improving security in his country. Laird was non-committal, but promised to take Thieu's concerns to Washington.<sup>69</sup>

In fact, Nixon was contemplating an increase in the pace of withdrawals to appease antiwar critics. His plans also included a peace proposal that Hanoi would probably reject and devastating bombing, mining, and blockade operations. As the troops left Vietnam, Nixon wanted to visit Saigon to bolster the Thieu regime. Kissinger could then promise Hanoi a speedier US withdrawal in exchange for a ceasefire. After the last American soldiers left South Vietnam, it would be up to Thieu to hold his country together. Jeffrey Kimball argues that this plan represented the culmination of Nixon's decent interval strategy, even though he had not abandoned hope that Thieu might survive in the long run.<sup>70</sup> Even if Nixon had not consciously intended to betray Saigon, such planning indicates that the White House felt an even greater need to preserve its strongman in South Vietnam.

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<sup>69</sup> Meeting Between The President, Secretary Rogers, Secretary Laird, Admiral Moorer, Director Helms and Dr. Kissinger, 18 January 1971, Box 83, Folder Not Numbered, WHSF, SMOF, POF, MP, RNLN.

<sup>70</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 239-240.

To appease Thieu, Nixon agreed to balance most of the withdrawals scheduled between May 1971 and May 1972 toward the latter six months of that period. The US president also offered to issue a statement reaffirming the long-term American commitment to South Vietnam. The White House was coming under increasing pressure from the American public and Congress to remove troops, however, so Vietnamization continued forward. In April, Bunker explained to Thieu that domestic opposition had convinced Nixon to announce another round of withdrawals on April 7. Washington remained fully committed to South Vietnamese security, Bunker promised, and suggested that Thieu and Nixon meet in July to reaffirm their friendship. Thieu consented to the meeting, which was later canceled because of the election. Nixon worried that removing too few troops would create the impression that Thieu was dictating American policy, but he still wanted to prop up his client.<sup>71</sup>

Most Nixon administration officials believed that the current levels of US funding for ARVN were insufficient to transform the South Vietnamese military into a fighting force that could survive an enemy attack. Nixon ordered Bunker to assure Thieu of immediate and long-term economic assistance, which was badly needed after operations in Laos revealed that the enemy had better artillery and bigger tanks. General Abrams predicted that the poor quality of the ARVN command staff would mitigate whatever advantages could be attained with improved tanks, but Nixon disagreed. The president

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<sup>71</sup> Embtel 2435, 19 January 1971, Box 153, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Backchannel Message From the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 5 April 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 527-529 (Document 173); Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig): 15 June 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 726-727 (Document 219).



thought that American tanks could be left behind in Vietnam after the troops left, particularly since leftover materiel was typically discarded. Even if the South Vietnamese did not need the tanks, Nixon believed Thieu could find a use for them. As Nixon put it, “Let ‘em sell it, put it on the black market, anything they want.” Nixon also agreed to provide Thieu with continued air support to head off enemy offenses expected within the next year.<sup>72</sup>

Kissinger met with Thieu at Independence Palace on July 4. Thieu insisted that in order to preserve South Vietnamese independence, he would need continued US air and logistics support for several years, accelerated modernization assistance for the RVNAF, and long-term economic and social aid. The enemy would launch a major offensive in 1972, he predicted, so he would need to rapidly modernize ARVN to withstand the attack. Even limited successes, Thieu admonished, would allow the enemy to score propaganda points during the US election.<sup>73</sup>

The US national security adviser promised only to communicate Thieu’s request personally to Nixon. He was more forthcoming during a discussion about South Korean troops. President Park had decided to remove just 10,000 of his soldiers between December 1971 and June 1972, leaving 37,860 in Vietnam. Both Thieu and Kissinger were pleased about the gradual pace of South Korean withdrawals. Kissinger promised to use his influence if Park later grew too eager to accelerate the recall. He also told Thieu—

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<sup>72</sup> Conversation Among President Nixon, the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker), and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 16 June 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 727-739 (Document 220)

<sup>73</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 4 July 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 782-798 (Document 231)

before notifying Abrams—that Nixon had approved a program to improve ARVN staff levels from 78 percent to 90 percent, at a cost of \$200 million. The White House would also help create new units in MRs I and II, should Thieu deem that necessary.

Washington preferred not to increase the number of South Vietnamese troops, but would accept an additional levy of 50,000 if necessary. When Thieu pressed the issue of American withdrawals, Kissinger promised that no additional troops would leave Vietnam beyond what was already planned. There would be 100,000 US soldiers in South Vietnam on 1 December 1971. By the end of 1972, the combat power of the few American soldiers who remained would be minimal, which is why Thieu so emphatically requested assistance to improve the RVNAF. Kissinger concurred with this assessment, and reinforced the American pledge to assist Saigon.<sup>74</sup>

Despite Kissinger's reassurances, Thieu still harbored doubts about the US commitment to him. Ambassador Bui Diem sent troubling reports to Saigon about rapid departures of American troops and the US Senate's opposition to a foreign assistance bill for South Vietnam. Nixon's upcoming visit to China led South Vietnamese officials to wonder if Washington would abandon them in order to woo a powerful rival. Thieu sent former Foreign Minister Tran Van Do to Washington at the end of November for a ten-day trip to assess the accuracy of these reports. The State Department assured Do that Washington was firmly committed to South Vietnam, but the visit indicated that Saigon had little confidence in its ally.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: Tran Van Do's Mission to Washington, 10 December 1971, Box 158, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Deptel

## **LAM SON 719**

The RVNAF's lackluster performance during an invasion of Laos aggravated Thieu's fears about Vietnamization. Operation Lam Son 719 proved Saigon was not capable of defeating a determined enemy. As the invasion quickly devolved into a rout for the South Vietnamese, a misunderstanding fostered new tensions between Nixon and Thieu. Washington blamed the South Vietnamese president for the military defeat, but Thieu cooperated with the American effort to portray the operation as a grand success. He lost more goodwill than he earned, but the White House was already firmly committed to Thieu. This episode demonstrated, however, just how quickly Nixon and Kissinger could transform from friends to foes.

Washington and Saigon presented Operation Lam Son 719 as a South Vietnamese initiative, but the plans evolved in the White House. The objective was to bolster ARVN's confidence and delay an expected enemy offensive. In the first phase of the mission, which began on 7 February 1971, US troops hoped to occupy positions along the demilitarized zone, near the Laotian border. In the second phase, South Vietnamese forces would seize and hold the village of Tchepone. In the third phase, 17,000 RVNAF soldiers would destroy enemy bases and return to South Vietnam within three months.

In Washington, William Rogers and Under Secretary of State Alex Johnson correctly predicted that the invasion would prove disastrous, but the operation continued over their protests. The North Vietnamese suspected in 1970 that Nixon would order an invasion of Laos, and so began to consolidate their strength there. They also discovered

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222326, 9 December 1971, Box 158, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 119-120.

the invasion plan before it was implemented, because NLF spies had infiltrated the Thieu regime. In addition, news of military maneuvers leaked to the US media as soon as the operation began. Hoping to foil its enemies, Hanoi dispatched 22,000 soldiers—later increased to 60,000—from the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) into Laos. The PAVN inflicted nearly 50 percent casualty rates on the South Vietnamese and ARVN managed to occupy Tchepone for just one day. On March 11 Kissinger reported that South Vietnamese forces were retreating. Despite evidence of a complete rout, the White House told the press that Lam Son 719 was proof that Vietnamization had succeeded.<sup>76</sup>

The White House laid most of the blame for the failed invasion on Thieu. Several problems plagued the operation. Since Thieu promoted ARVN officers on the basis of their loyalty to him, instead of their competence, South Vietnamese forces suffered poor leadership. In addition, ARVN's radio operators struggled to communicate with English-speaking US airmen. Finally, Kissinger accused Thieu of issuing orders on February 12 to retreat if ARVN suffered more than 3,000 casualties. Thieu denied these allegations, but

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<sup>76</sup> Backchannel Message From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 16 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 457-459 (Document 151); Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 441-442 (Document 143); Embtel 2435, 19 February 1971, Box 153, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1004; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 43-44; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 297-298; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 241-248; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 257-263; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 202-203; Pang Yang Huei, "Beginning of the End: ARVN and Vietnamisation (1969-72)," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 17, no. 3 (September 2006): 287-310, p. 295. For more on Lam Son 719, see Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1988), 472-476. For an in-depth description of the operation, see Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, Indochina Monographs (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979).

he did order an early withdrawal, even if he did not set a casualty limit. He had been reluctant to begin the campaign in the first place, and while he had promised Bunker that he would participate and that his troops could prevail, Thieu's optimism waned as ARVN approached Tchepone.<sup>77</sup> Fearing a trap, Thieu instructed his commander, General Hoang Xuan Lam, not to hold the village: "You get in there just long enough to take a piss and then leave quickly."<sup>78</sup>

When Abrams reported that Thieu was thinking about withdrawing after the occupation of Tchepone, an angry Kissinger threatened Thieu that this would likely be the last time Washington could bankroll a long-term offensive operation. Under pressure from Bunker and Abrams, Thieu agreed to continue the invasion.<sup>79</sup> The RVNAF continued to withdraw, however, as it collapsed beneath the North Vietnamese onslaught. Kissinger reacted with a stern warning. In another message to Bunker, he warned, "I hope Thieu understands that the President's confidence is an asset he should not lightly

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<sup>77</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 245; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 989-1010; Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 43-44; Huei, "Beginning of the End," 293-296; John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), 318, 341-350; Backchannel Message From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 16 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 457-459 (Document 151); Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 441-442 (Document 143); Embtel 2435, 19 February 1971, Box 153, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>78</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 43.

<sup>79</sup> Backchannel Message From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker), 9 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 450 (Document 147); Backchannel Message From the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 12 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 452-453 (Document 149).

dissipate and that this may be his last crack at massive U.S. support.”<sup>80</sup> The national security adviser later conceded that he was wrong to urge Saigon to continue the campaign, but he and Nixon were furious at the time. In reality, there was little that they could do to salvage the operation. While Thieu stated beforehand that he did not want to remain in Laos for more than five to eight weeks, Kissinger complained that Saigon had not been clear on that point. In any event, Kissinger’s efforts proved futile. Haig reported that it was impossible to apply significant pressure on Saigon without devastating the allies’ relationship.<sup>81</sup>

As Lam Son 719 wound down, Thieu insisted that he would not leave Laos alone. Future operations would keep pressure on the enemy, he promised, and the invasion had at least triggered a surge of public support for him. The White House insisted publicly that the South Vietnamese had emerged from Lam Son 719 with a partial military victory. Kissinger told the president that the enemy had suffered grievous losses and lost significant war materiel. Official US after-action reports indicated that the North Vietnamese army lost 26,000 men. The exact number of PAVN casualties is unknown, but the operation put ARVN’s capacity to engage a determined enemy in doubt. The White House nonetheless insisted before the press that Lam Son 719 had succeeded by

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<sup>80</sup> Backchannel Message From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker), 18 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 467 (Document 156).

<sup>81</sup> Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1008; Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between Secretary of Defense Laird and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 21 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 481-484 (Document 160); Backchannel Message From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 19 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 475-477 (Document 158).

delaying enemy plans for another offensive. Thieu maintained this myth, embarking on public rallies and handing out extra rations and money to Lam Son 719 survivors, even though he did not believe the threat from Hanoi had been neutralized. He expected that another invasion of Laos might be necessary during the next dry season (December 1971 through early 1972), when the enemy would likely make another push to influence the US presidential elections and take advantage of the diminishing presence of American troops.<sup>82</sup>

The White House failed to convince the American public that the invasion had achieved anything significant. Nixon had planned to portray the operation as a success even before it began and tried to blame the press for creating a false impression of failure. Privately, though, he admitted to failure and lamented ARVN's poor performance. Senator Fulbright declared the invasion a fiasco, and the American people largely supported him. A Gallup poll indicated that fewer than 20 percent of Americans believed the invasion would help bring the war to an earlier conclusion, while 40 percent believed

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<sup>82</sup> Memorandum of Conversation Between President Thieu, Ambassador Bunker, General Abrams, and General Haig, 19 March 1971, Box 153, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 22 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 488-490 (Document 162); Embtel 7990, 22 May 1971, Box 154, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Embtel 4929, 3 April 1971, Box 153, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 10 April 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 534-535 (Document 176); Peter Kann, "Paradox of War: Optimism in Vietnam, Fear in Laos Point Up Ambiguities of Battle," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 1971; Alvin Shuster, "Thieu, Facing Election, Sees Political Gains in Laos Drive," *New York Times*, 18 March 1971; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 297-298; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 246-247; Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 649-654; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 472-476; Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1999), 261-263

it would draw the conflict out. *Time*, *Life*, and the *New York Times* all declared Lam Son 719 a rout for the South Vietnamese. In a summary of global newspaper commentary on the invasion, the US Information Agency (USIA) reported that most journalists considered the invasion an embarrassing defeat for Washington and Saigon.<sup>83</sup>

The Thieu regime faced a difficult military environment after 1971. The latest pacification campaign had not produced satisfactory results, and Thieu was devoting less time to that effort. Lam Son 719 proved that ARVN had not evolved into an effective fighting force under Vietnamization, and US troops were rapidly departing from the country. Thieu was holding on for the moment, but barely. Nixon and Kissinger continued to pursue a negotiated settlement that would leave their client in place, at least long enough to protect American credibility as a global power.

## WIDENING RIFT

Unfortunately, the 1971 peace talks were unproductive and produced new tensions between Washington and Saigon. Thieu's presidency remained a sticking point in the negotiations with Hanoi. Unable to force the North Vietnamese into accepting Thieu as the legitimate leader of South Vietnam, Nixon gave further consideration to a decent interval strategy. The White House was still glossing over important points in its briefings with Thieu, but the few details Saigon heard were disturbing. So successful were the US promises of fidelity to South Vietnam, however, that Thieu could not believe Richard

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<sup>83</sup> CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1971. Vol. 117, pt. 7, S: 9071-9080 (the *Life*, *New York Times*, and USIA reports are included in the above citation, as Fulbright entered them into the *Congressional Record*); "The World: The Wan Edge of an Abyss," *Time*, 12 April 1971; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 260-262; Embtel 4929, 3 April 1971, Box 153, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 246-248.



Nixon would betray him. Instead, Thieu focused his wrath on Kissinger, claiming that the US national security adviser was fooling Nixon into selling out South Vietnam.

Nixon still felt pressure to support Thieu in 1971, despite the South Vietnamese president's misconduct in the election, neglect of pacification and the War on Drugs, and dismal failures in Lam Son 719. The *Pentagon Papers*, leaked to the press that year, revealed the Kennedy administration's role in the coup that killed Ngo Dinh Diem. Nixon feared that failure to support Thieu would invite unfavorable comparisons with Kennedy's treatment of Diem. Years later, Kissinger maintained that the prospect of betraying Thieu at that point was unpalatable.<sup>84</sup> Even if Nixon and Kissinger pursued a decent interval solution, they still needed to protect Thieu's status in any peace agreement.

Before the negotiations in Paris even resumed, Bunker asked Thieu to extend an olive branch to his enemies. Thieu was considering a proposal to allow the NLF to run for seats in the Lower House. He also contemplated further elaborations of his 1969 proposal to let the NLF participate in a general election monitored by a mixed electoral commission. As mentioned above, Nixon had intended to visit Thieu to publicly reaffirm the US commitment to South Vietnamese self-determination while Vietnamization proceeded. Before Nixon was forced to cancel this visit in light of Thieu's re-election campaign, General Haig thought the summit might be an excellent opportunity to issue

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<sup>84</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 635; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 271; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1029.

another political settlement plan.<sup>85</sup> In general, however, there was little pressure on Thieu. As long as the Paris negotiations were stalled, there was no incentive to make concessions.

Nixon tried to use Moscow and Beijing as leverage against North Vietnam. By linking the Vietnam War to various elements of détente and rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, he hoped to force the two communist superpowers to encourage Hanoi to be more forthcoming at the peace table. The effort was wholly unsuccessful, and highly frustrating.<sup>86</sup> In June, Nixon exploded over his failed triangular diplomacy. If there was no progress in ending the war by November, he swore, he would order a massive bombing campaign in North Vietnam. He would not limit US airmen to bombing communist supply lines, this time, insisting that, "we're gonna take out the dikes, we're gonna take out the power plants, we're gonna take out Haiphong, we're gonna level that goddamn country!"<sup>87</sup>

As the president entertained visions of a fiery apocalypse, his national security adviser sought a compromise in Paris. Secret negotiations began in May, and Kissinger carried with him a new seven-point peace plan. His proposal included a new concession: the final abandonment of demands for mutual withdrawals. In exchange for the complete removal of US forces, the North Vietnamese only needed to promise to end infiltration

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<sup>85</sup> Memorandum of Conversation: Secretary Laird's Meeting with Ambassador Bunker, 4 February 1971, Box 153, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Backchannel Message From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 16 March 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 457-459 (Document 151).

<sup>86</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 260-263; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 303; Hanhimaki, "Selling the Decent Interval," 162-170.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 308.

into South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The political future of South Vietnam would be left to its citizenry, but Thieu's presidency remained a sticking point for Hanoi.

Emboldened by the outcome of Lam Son 719, North Vietnamese officials saw no reason to abandon their demand for a new government in Saigon. The talks continued throughout the summer and fall, but Hanoi would not accept the current South Vietnamese government. Nixon and Kissinger were determined to support Thieu, refusing Le Duc Tho's intimation that the Americans assassinate the South Vietnamese president or dispose of him in some other fashion. Kissinger may have been open to a coalition government, but Nixon flatly refused to consider any such scheme.<sup>88</sup>

In his memoirs, Kissinger claimed that Thieu was informed on May 31 that Washington had abandoned its demand for the mutual withdrawal of American and PAVN soldiers from the South. Thieu later claimed that US officials kept him very poorly informed of the deliberations in Paris, and that he did not understand that the American position on mutual withdrawals had changed.<sup>89</sup> This misunderstanding later became the source of great tension between Washington and Saigon, as Thieu resisted signing the final Paris Peace Accords in 1972 and 1973 because he feared the presence of North Vietnamese soldiers.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 307-308, 316-321; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 260-282; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 84-85, 97-99; Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace*, 391-394, 487-496.

<sup>89</sup> Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1043; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 48-49, fn. 22 on p. 490-491.

<sup>90</sup> See Chapter 5 for details about the final peace agreement and the negotiations that led to it.

The major source of tension in 1971, however, arose over the provision for Thieu's resignation. When he visited Saigon on July 4, however, Kissinger did not raise this issue. Indeed, he repeatedly stated that Washington would not interfere with the South Vietnamese government. Thieu offered to continue to work in concert with the American delegation, and was no doubt satisfied when Kissinger said that the White House was in no hurry to reach a peace settlement. Unaware of the changing circumstances, Thieu continued to campaign on the basis of the Four No's and his proposal to let members of the NLF participate in an election. When Haig visited Saigon in the fall, however, he suggested that it would be helpful if Thieu agreed to resign one month before post-settlement elections to create a new government. To facilitate a compromise, Thieu endorsed the proposal and even agreed not to run as a presidential candidate in any postwar contest. Washington was content that its ally was cooperating, and Thieu felt reassured that the White House would not try to forcibly remove him from power.<sup>91</sup>

Thieu fretted, however, when he found out that Kissinger had submitted a proposal to Hanoi on November 20 that included provisions for Thieu's resignation one month before a postwar election without first consulting Saigon. He had not known this concession would be passed to the enemy so quickly. Thieu grew very suspicious of Kissinger, even if he had not yet reached the conclusion that Nixon had betrayed South

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<sup>91</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 4 July 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 782-798 (Document 231); Embtel 9075, 9 July 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 7109, 9 May 1971, Box 117, Folder 5, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: General Haig's Talk with President Thieu, 6 October 1971, Box 157, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

Vietnam. Indeed, his first assumption was that the national security adviser was not keeping Nixon properly informed. Kissinger, for his part, seemed genuinely convinced that Thieu had accepted the principle of a postwar resignation.<sup>92</sup> This division of blame in Thieu's mind kept the US-South Vietnamese relationship alive for the moment, but Saigon was becoming aware of Washington's impending betrayal.

### **PRELUDE TO BETRAYAL**

Devastating tensions erupted in the US-South Vietnamese relationship in 1971. Ambassador Bunker and State Department officials in Washington were disappointed that Thieu had eliminated all of his electoral opponents. The campaign had a deleterious effect on pacification, which was already weaker due to Saigon's greater attention to security measures than efforts to generate popular goodwill. The War on Drugs, an attempt to polish Saigon's public image, did not succeed. Thieu had little interest in destroying a system that helped guarantee him military and civilian support, and only made a show of arrests and reforms. American soldiers continued to leave the country under Vietnamization, and the South Vietnamese replacements were poor compensation. Kissinger blamed Thieu for the failure of Lam Son 719, and relations between the two became further strained after Kissinger failed to consult him before submitting a peace proposal to Hanoi.

Despite these tensions, the White House remained committed to Thieu personally. While Nixon contemplated a decent interval solution, he would not push Thieu out of

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<sup>92</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 16-17; Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 18 September 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 918-928 (Document 257).

power as the North Vietnamese indirectly suggested. Diem's removal in 1963, of course, had resulted in unintended chaos. Convinced in 1969 and 1970 that the Vietnamese were irrational, primitive, and naturally chaotic, moreover, the Nixon administration embraced Thieu, who seemed reasonable, strong, and cooperative. In 1971, the White House helped Thieu win the South Vietnamese presidential election-turned-plebiscite, assuming that he was the only man in the country capable of leading his country competently.

The White House's relationship with Thieu, though, had reached a major turning point. Nixon's reliance on Kissinger for major policy decisions in Indochina had previously protected Thieu from critics, particularly in the State Department. Nixon's decision also exposed the alliance between the United States and Vietnam to certain vulnerabilities. By cutting out seasoned officials from the decision-making process, Nixon also made close relations with Saigon dependent on cooperation between men with huge egos and clashing personalities. When Nixon, Kissinger, and Thieu reached the limits of their capacities to communicate cordially in 1972, the alliance nearly collapsed.

## **CHAPTER 5: WHEN THE TAIL CAN'T WAG THE DOG, 1972–JAN 1973**

The Nixon administration made excuses for Thieu's poor performance in 1971, arguing that his re-election campaign distracted him from other pressing matters. American officials hoped that he would honor his promises to implement the anti-corruption campaign and War on Drugs the following year. Unfortunately for Washington, Hanoi launched the Spring Offensive in 1972, an ambitious invasion of the South that required Thieu's full attention. When the battle was over, progress in the peace negotiations triggered new tensions between Washington and Saigon that nearly destroyed the decades-long alliance. With an end to the war in sight, Nixon and Kissinger fixated on forcing Thieu to accept a settlement that undermined South Vietnamese security. When the client refused to submit to its hegemon, Nixon and Kissinger voiced their most visceral, hateful, bigoted opinions about Thieu and the South Vietnamese. Determined to protect American interests, the US president and national security adviser pursued the Paris Peace Accords over Thieu's repeated protests that they spelled doom for South Vietnam.

Cold War tensions, realpolitik, and racism had previously combined to justify American support for Thieu. Under the assumption that Thieu was a stabilizing force in a country of fractious, selfish, irrational buffoons, the White House credited him for his achievements while downplaying his failures. American officials began to criticize Thieu more frequently in 1971, and his performance during the Spring Offensive raised further doubts about his capacity to defend South Vietnam. His status in the White House rapidly devolved in late 1972, however, when he became an obstacle to the peace agreement that

Nixon endorsed. No longer vowing to see the war through with Nguyen Van Thieu, US officials considered abandoning South Vietnam altogether.

## **THE SPRING OFFENSIVE**

On March 30, with only 6,000 US combat troops remaining in South Vietnam, Hanoi launched the Spring Offensive. The North Vietnamese hoped the invasion would disrupt American relations with Moscow and Beijing, weaken Nixon's presidential campaign, and discredit Vietnamization. If all went according to plan, the NLF would gain greater freedom on the battlefield and more leverage at the peace table.<sup>1</sup> Thieu's performance at the beginning of the invasion generally satisfied the White House, but he failed to impress US officials in the latter stages of the campaign. Embassy Saigon and the US military initially expressed appreciation for Thieu's confident and effective leadership, but soon grew concerned that he was not doing enough to shore up Saigon's defenses. Kissinger concurred, but did not want to demoralize Thieu with criticism. Nixon was dissatisfied with Thieu's decision to adopt a defensive posture during the Spring Offensive, arguing that the South Vietnamese president lacked an aggressive spirit. Now less enamored with Thieu, Nixon began to speak of forcing a peace settlement on Saigon.

The US president initially responded to the Spring Offensive by ordering devastating air strikes on the demilitarized zone and North Vietnamese fuel depots. Kissinger told the Soviet ambassador that the White House held Moscow responsible for the attacks, in the vain hope that the USSR would pressure Hanoi to terminate the offensive. As an added incentive, Kissinger claimed that Washington might accept a

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<sup>1</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 304-305.



ceasefire that permitted active North Vietnamese soldiers to remain in the South. After Hanoi rejected Kissinger's proposal on May 1, Nixon retaliated with what one historian calls "the greatest armada of naval and air power assembled during the war."<sup>2</sup> In launching Operation Linebacker—a US military effort to mine Haiphong harbor, blockade communist ports, and bomb North Vietnamese targets—Nixon privately vowed vengeance: "The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time."<sup>3</sup>

The Soviets and Chinese publicly protested the bombing, but they also pressed Hanoi to accept a reasonable peace settlement. Nixon also scored a coup at home, as 59% of the war-weary US public supported his decisive retaliation against North Vietnam. His approval rating rose significantly. The bombing temporarily protected South Vietnam from total collapse, but Saigon nonetheless lost control of territory along its borders with Laos and Cambodia. The invasion further exposed the RVNAF's weaknesses, but neither Washington nor Hanoi proved capable of achieving military supremacy. The stalemate eventually led both sides back to the negotiating table.<sup>4</sup>

Neither the attack nor Saigon's weakness were surprising. In 1971, South Vietnamese and American officials had predicted that Hanoi would launch a major

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 305-307.

<sup>3</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 307; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 315

<sup>4</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 307-310; Louis Harris, *The Anguish of Change* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), 73-74. For detailed accounts of the Spring Offensive, see: Dale Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001); Thomas P. McKenna, *Kontum: The Battle to Save South Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011); Stephen P. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Lam Quang Thi, *Hell in An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle that Saved South Vietnam* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2009); James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

offensive the following year. In January 1972, Kissinger asked the NSC's Senior Review Group to devise a defense plan for South Vietnam. Assistant Secretary of Defense Warren Nutter argued that Thieu needed to improve the fighting capacity of his forces.<sup>5</sup> Kissinger, however, claimed that Thieu was making some bold decisions to enhance ARVN's strength. The South Vietnamese president replaced several ineffective division commanders and province chiefs, and Kissinger expected further command changes in the near future.<sup>6</sup>

At an NSC meeting on February 2, Nixon suggested that Thieu could forestall the upcoming offensive by once again invading Cambodia. Bunker doubted that Thieu would agree to such an operation. Saigon preferred to shore up its defenses before the North Vietnamese marched south, he observed, but Nixon was in an aggressive mood. With a three-to-one preponderance of forces and powerful naval and air forces, the president thought that Saigon could manage the invasion of Cambodia while protecting the homeland. The United States could help repel the impending attacks, but the Thieu regime had to win this battle on its own. As Rogers warned, it would be very difficult to obtain further aid from Congress if ARVN suffered another defeat so soon after the failure in Laos.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Minutes of a Senior Review Group Meeting, 24 January 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 18-28 (Document 4).

<sup>6</sup> Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 41-43 (Document 12).

<sup>7</sup> National Security Council Meeting, 2 February 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 44-70 (Document 13). For a review of the 1971 South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, see Chapter 4.

To shore up Thieu's confidence, Bunker offered improved US air support for ARVN on April 5, a few days after the opening of the Spring Offensive.<sup>8</sup> A letter from Nixon to Thieu dated the same day included a promise to take "whatever added military steps are necessary" to help Saigon thwart this latest instance of communist aggression. Nixon tried to strengthen Thieu's resolve by professing his "profound admiration for the leadership you are providing... in resisting Hanoi's attacks."<sup>9</sup> The South Vietnamese president confirmed that he could defeat the Northern invaders, and Bunker reported that Thieu was both calm and confident. Thieu's sound leadership was already yielding impressive results, the ambassador claimed, as ARVN units responded much more readily to orders in 1972 than they had during the Tet Offensive. Kissinger repeated Bunker's praise for Thieu in a report to President Nixon on April 12.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the month, Kissinger reported that ARVN was doing well, overall, but some units had performed poorly. When Nixon received that memo, however, he focused on the positive news, underlining a sentence about General Abrams' optimism regarding South Vietnamese combat performance. Abrams doubted that the RVNAF could have handled the invasion without US mobility support, but he praised the efficacy of the South Vietnamese air force and logistical systems. Kissinger summarized Abrams'

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<sup>8</sup> Embtel 4686, 5 April 1972, Box 159, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Nixon to Thieu, 5 April 1972, Box 766, Folder 2, NSCF, PC, RNLM

<sup>10</sup> Embtel 4686, 5 April 1972, Box 159, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Backchannel Message From the Ambassador to South Vietnam (Bunker) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 6 April 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 218-219 (Document 63); Embtel 4864, 7 April 1972, Box 159, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: President Thieu's Views, 10 April 1972, Box 130, Folder 1, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: The Situation in South Vietnam, 12 April 1972, Box 130, Folder 1, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Telegram to Kissinger [Hereafter, TOHAK] 0061 from Bunker, 12 April 1972, Box 130, Folder 1, NSCF, VSF, RNLM. For more information about the Tet Offensive, see Chapter 1.

opinion that “President Thieu has provided sound guidance to the Joint General Staff and has made prompt decisions and timely visits to combat areas.”<sup>11</sup> Abrams’ described Thieu’s leadership as “outstanding.”<sup>12</sup>

Kissinger’s optimism faded on May 1, however, when he received word that Quang Tri City had fallen to the enemy.<sup>13</sup> Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed that ARVN should have retreated from the beleaguered city, but Thieu had insisted on holding Quang Tri and Hue. Kissinger worried that “if Thieu loses a division every time he loses a provincial capital, he’s going to end up losing the country.”<sup>14</sup> To strengthen Saigon’s response to the invasion, Thieu replaced more ineffective ARVN commanders and imposed martial law to stifle popular dissent.<sup>15</sup>

Bunker nonetheless remained concerned that Thieu was not taking the Spring Offensive seriously. Without consulting Kissinger, the ambassador and General Abrams warned the South Vietnamese leader that he needed to make major improvements to ARVN’s officer corps if he wanted to rebuff the communists. Bunker complained that the inefficacy of various field commanders was compromising ARVN’s forces, and urged Thieu to “straighten them out.” When Kissinger heard of this lecture, he vented to General Haig: “It is a self-serving egg-sucking, panicky lecture by Abrams. Does he

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<sup>11</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Undated, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 308-311 (Document 93).

<sup>12</sup> General Creighton Abrams, “Personal Assessment of the Situation in RVN as of 24 April 1972,” 24 April 1972, Box 117, Folder 7, NSCF, VSF, RNLN.

<sup>13</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 312; Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, 1 May 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 350-359 (Document 107)

<sup>14</sup> Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, 1 May 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 350-359 (Document 107).

<sup>15</sup> Memo to Ambassador Green on Vietnam, Undated, “Pol 2 – Memoranda, Reports for Ambs. Green, Sullivan, 1972,” Box 18, Lot 75D336, RG 59, NARA.

think Thieu needs instruction on the gravity of his situation? He cannot make up now for his errors of the past two years.” Kissinger worried that Thieu might interpret the Bunker-Abrams lecture as an indication that Washington was preparing to sell out Saigon at the peace table, Kissinger ordered Bunker to promise Thieu that the White House still supported Saigon.<sup>16</sup>

After Bunker reassured Thieu of American backing, the South Vietnamese president reciprocated by agreeing to replace a few more inadequate ARVN commanders. To improve morale, Thieu also visited ARVN soldiers in Hue and Danang.<sup>17</sup> In a letter to his wife, Bunker reflected on Vietnam’s dilemma: “in the kind of Mandarin tradition that still persists in this society, the man at the top is often not given the bad news that he needs to know until he is overtaken by events.” Bunker believed that Thieu had been unaware of how poorly ARVN was performing, conveniently forgetting his own optimistic reporting to Washington. While concerned that Thieu was not responding to the invasion with sufficient vigor, Bunker believed the president was doing the best he could with cowardly advisers.<sup>18</sup>

Nixon was pleased with the RVNAF command changes, too, but he was still unhappy that Saigon remained on the defensive. He hoped that the new commanders would imbue their soldiers with a more aggressive spirit. Nixon wanted to take decisive

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<sup>16</sup> Editorial Note, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 391-393 (Document 111). Note: Some of the documents for the Kissinger-Bunker-Abrams-Haig conversation remain classified, so the *FRUS* editorial note remains the best source for this discussion. The State Department’s Office of the Historian, which produces the *FRUS* series, has access to documents that are still unavailable to public researchers.

<sup>17</sup> Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Meetings with President Thieu, 3 May 1972, Box 130, Folder 2, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Embtel 6374, 3 May 1972, Box 160, Folder 2, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>18</sup> Schaffer, *Ellsworth Bunker*, 239.

action to repel the enemy invasion, and to that end was contemplating a “goddamn hard” strike to “belt the hell out of [North Vietnam].” As Nixon mulled over plans for Operation Linebacker, however, he suggested that Washington should force Thieu to respond to the Spring Offensive proactively. “Maybe we have to go to Thieu and say, ‘Look here, boy.’”<sup>19</sup> Such paternalistic commentary flowed more commonly from the Oval Office in 1972, as the president grew disenchanted with Thieu.

As Thieu’s reputation sank in Washington, Abrams endorsed his command changes and strategic plans to repel the enemy, which included clearing An Loc of enemy units and sending airborne soldiers into MR I. The White House did not give Thieu advance notice of the Linebacker bombings, though, indicating that Washington still doubted the ability of South Vietnamese to defend themselves. In order to take advantage of American assistance, Thieu urged the South Vietnamese public to keep fighting the enemy and asked the National Assembly to grant him greater executive powers so he could better manage national resources. Already, he was preparing to enact emergency tax decrees to finance the defense of South Vietnam. Bunker lauded Thieu’s leadership and initiative.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Conversation with Nixon, 6:25 PM, 3 May 1972, Box 14, Folder 1, HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM.

<sup>20</sup> Message From the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Abrams) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Moorer) and the Commander in Chief, Pacific (McCain), 4 May 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 413-414 (Document 118); Backchannel Message From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to South Vietnam (Bunker), 7 May 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 478-479 (Document 128); Peter Osnos, “Thieu Hails Nixon Step,” *Washington Post*, 10 May 1972; Embtel 6910, 11 May 1972, Box 117, Folder 6, NSCF, VSF, RNLM; Craig R. Whitney, “Thieu Orders Martial Law; Ousts an Area Commander,” *New York Times*, 11 May 1972; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Ambassador Bunker’s Assessment, 19 May 1972, Box 130, Folder 2, NSCF, VSF, RNLM.

The major thrusts of the Spring Offensive ended by June. Combat continued through the summer and into the fall, but the tempo of violence was much lower. Hue, Kontum, and An Loc all held out against North Vietnamese attacks. The ARVN recaptured Quang Tri City in mid-September, but lost much of the surrounding province and MR I. The invasion came to a grinding halt because of North Vietnamese tactical and strategic mistakes; the fighting prowess of South Vietnamese forces; the Clausewitzian friction that armies face in operations on external supply lines; and American assistance, most notably the fighting prowess of US airmen. While PAVN failed to overthrow Thieu, it could not be dislodged from the South. North Vietnamese achievements were based on ingenuity in responding to a technologically superior foe. By studying American technology and tactics, they were able to turn various battles in their favor. The North Vietnamese also benefited from an unwavering commitment of time and resources.<sup>21</sup>

The Paris peace talks accelerated quickly, now, as both Hanoi and Washington concluded that little more could be achieved through military pressure. Thieu's performance throughout the Spring Offensive supported this conclusion. While he continued to some earn praise from some US officials, he failed to convince the White House that he could effectively defend South Vietnam from outside aggression.

## **CLOSING THE IRON FIST**

As Thieu confronted the Spring Offensive, he dismantled the last façade of South Vietnamese democracy. Facing the worst crisis Saigon had seen since Tet 1968, Thieu created a police state and centralized power in his office. The government also imposed

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<sup>21</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 323; Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 338-339.

tough new restrictions on the press to dampen domestic political dissent, frustrating both American and South Vietnamese critics.<sup>22</sup> The White House publicly defended its ally from criticism, and ignored Thieu's repression. Nixon and Kissinger did not believe it was their place to criticize an ally for taking necessary, if unpalatable, steps to defend his homeland. The diminishing US troop presence in Indochina also reduced Washington's leverage over Saigon, even though South Vietnam remained dependent on foreign aid.

Racism helped the Nixon administration to ignore Thieu's crimes. As with the persecution of National Assemblyman Tran Ngoc Chau in 1970, most US officials simply tolerated Thieu's repression, rather than actively defend it. Scholars of American foreign relations have convincingly argued that racism facilitates this tolerance. Such behavior was also logically consistent with earlier American discourses of Vietnamese racial inferiority. Since US officials believed that most South Vietnamese were incompetent and obsessed with personal gain, the White House could rationalize Thieu's extraordinary measures to exert greater control over his people. Indeed, some US policymakers explicitly condoned Thieu's authoritarianism on these grounds.<sup>23</sup>

On January 24, for example, John Negroponte of the NSC informed Kissinger that Thieu was thinking about abolishing the Senate or eliminating much of its power; amending the constitution so that he could run for a third term as president; and eliminating the Inspectorate, the branch of government that investigated corruption

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<sup>22</sup> Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 484

<sup>23</sup> For more on the theoretical relationship between racism and repression, see the discussion of the Chau Affair in Chapter 3.



among government officials and private citizens.<sup>24</sup> The State Department produced a draft telegram asking Bunker to warn Thieu that such modifications to South Vietnamese law could have dire consequences. Negroponte recommended against this interference, arguing that none of Thieu's plans were relevant to US interests. The State Department had only produced the draft telegram to create a record of dissent on repression, and did not expect it to lead to concrete policy changes. Negroponte thought Thieu would consider the message petty and recommended that Kissinger "either scotch this cable entirely or emasculate it." The national security adviser chose the latter option.<sup>25</sup>

Bunker, meanwhile, reinforced the prevailing assumption in the White House that Thieu was a stabilizing force in Vietnam. Acknowledging that Saigon continued to face strong political and military threats from the North Vietnamese and NLF, the ambassador argued that Thieu was now firmly in power. The tensions of the 1971 electoral campaign were dissipating and Bunker believed that most South Vietnamese had accepted the final result. The ambassador hoped Thieu would now feel "less constrained" in taking necessary actions, and noted that the South Vietnamese president was even forming a new organization, the Democracy Party, to improve his popular standing.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, not all Americans excused Thieu's repression. Representative Donald Fraser (DFL-MN) rebuked Thieu's efforts to silence political opponents. Fraser pointed to reports that the South Vietnamese police closed an orphanage for allegedly harboring

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<sup>24</sup> Memorandum from John Negroponte to Kissinger: President Thieu's Political Intentions, 24 January 1972, Box 158, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Draft Deptel, 21 January 1972, Box 158, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Goodman, *Politics in War*, 122.

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum from John Negroponte to Kissinger: President Thieu's Political Intentions, 24 January 1972, Box 158, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM.

<sup>26</sup> Embtel 1175, 26 January 1972, Box 158, Folder 5, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Fox Butterfield, "Thieu is Forming a Political Party: Includes Old-Line Politicians and Military Officers," *New York Times*, 10 March 1972.

draft dodgers and hosting Buddhist political events. The police relocated three thousand “terrorized children,” fatally poisoning three of them with tear gas and injuring several others.<sup>27</sup> Bella Abzug (D-NY) protested Saigon’s arrest of Mme. Ngo Ba Thanh, an American-educated lawyer and fierce critic of Thieu. Thanh languished in prison for six months, where she suffered from severe asthma. A military field court finally consented to review the charges against her, but postponed her trial and returned her to prison after she suffered another asthma attack. As the year unfolded, several other members of the US Congress began to openly criticize Thieu’s police state. Similar protests appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Time*.<sup>28</sup>

The Nixon administration convinced itself that the North Vietnamese invasion reduced some of the fallout from Thieu’s repression, and quietly praised his ability to survive the turbulence. On April 25, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Sullivan reported that the South Vietnamese Senate was less resistant to Thieu’s agenda, and that the An Quang Buddhists were more focused on opposing the North Vietnamese invasion than thwarting Thieu’s political agenda. Kissinger marveled at Thieu’s

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<sup>27</sup> CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 5, H: 5361-5362.

<sup>28</sup> CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 8, H: 10147; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 13, S: 16407-16408; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 18, H: 23825-23826; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 20, H: 26578; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 22, H: 28436-38437; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 22, H: 28608; Craig R. Whitney, “Vietnam: Democracy was Very Disorderly,” *New York Times*, 10 September 1972; “Why Fight On for President Thieu?” *Washington Post*, 11 September 1972; “The World: Thunderbolt from Thieu,” *Time*, 18 September 1972; Craig R. Whitney, “Thieu’s Rule Tighter Since Enemy Drive: Direct Rule Replaces Democratic Forms,” *New York Times*, 25 September 1972.

resilience: “He has survived extraordinary vicissitudes.” Sullivan agreed: “He’s a cool fellow.”<sup>29</sup>

Controversy erupted after North Vietnamese soldiers took control of Quang Tri City and the South Vietnamese public discovered how poorly some ARVN generals were performing. Thieu stifled his most vocal domestic opponents by gathering ever more power to himself. He declared martial law, transferring power from civil to military authorities, and temporarily suspended local elections. He also asked for permission to rule by decree. Pro-government deputies in the Lower House originally tried to provide Thieu unrestricted authority to issue decree laws. The Senate rejected this bill, and Thieu’s supporters in the Lower House could not raise the super-majority vote needed to override that decision. The modified bill that finally passed restricted Thieu’s emergency powers to a six-month grant of control over matters of defense, security, the economy, and finance. Bunker insisted that most of the decrees that Thieu issued over the next several months—including an expansion of the draft, new taxes, and modification of the piaster’s exchange rate—were all necessary and desirable responses to the Spring Offensive. Kissinger relayed the ambassador’s praise to Nixon.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, 25 April 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 314-320 (Document 95).

<sup>30</sup> Memo to Ambassador Green on Vietnam, Undated, “Pol 2 – Memoranda, Reports for Ambs. Green, Sullivan, 1972,” Box 18, Lot 75D336, RG 59, NARA; Embtel 6635, 8 May 1972, “Pol 15.1 – President Thieu, 1972,” Box 18, Lot 75D336, RG 59, NARA; Embtel 6624, 8 May 1972, “Pol 15.1 – President Thieu, 1972,” Box 18, Lot 75D336, RG 59, NARA; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon: Ambassador Bunker’s Assessment of Vietnam Situation, 3 August 1972, Box 161, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Memorandum of Present Situation by Ambassador Bunker, 26 July 1972, Box 161, Folder 4, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Joseph Treaster, “Senate in Saigon Rejects Thieu Bid for Decree Rule: But President Has Already Declared Martial Law and Assumed Wide Powers,” *New York Times*, 3 June 1972; Jerry Mark Silverman, “Vietnam and the Elusive Peace,” *Asian Survey* 13, No. 1 (Jan. 1973): 19-45, p. 32-36.

In August, Thieu triggered an outcry by substantially increasing the restrictions of his 1969 press censorship law. The government closed forty-one newspapers and forced two opposition papers to register a bond of twenty million piasters with government censors, allegedly as insurance to protect them from libel suits. Presses that distributed their own material needed to add another five million piasters to the account, and distribution agencies had to deposit fifty million piasters. Dailies or periodicals could be suspended if individual issues were confiscated more than once for alleged abuses.<sup>31</sup>

The US embassy expressed concern when a prominent South Vietnamese senator threatened to close down his newspaper rather than submit to the press law. The Assemblyman had generally supported Thieu in previous years, and accepted the government's argument that it needed to control the number of dailies in Saigon. He also believed, however, that Thieu's new law violated the spirit of the Emergency Powers Act. Bunker's name was on the telegram reporting this development, but he did not author it. It is unlikely that he would have been particularly exercised about enhanced censorship, given his approval of Thieu's other decree-laws. Public pressure in Saigon eventually persuaded Thieu to ease back on censorship, but he continued to exert tight control over the polity.<sup>32</sup>

In the fall, Thieu adopted authority to imprison, without a trial, anyone accused of treason, membership in a communist organization, murder, surrender, rebellion, or rape.

When Thieu signed the Paris Peace Accords, he acknowledged that he held 32,000

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<sup>31</sup> Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 484; Embtel 11506, 6 August 1972, Box 161, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 20, H: 26578.

<sup>32</sup> Penniman, *Elections in South Vietnam*, 161-163; CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 22, H: 26578; Draft Deptel, 10 August 1972, "Pol 1 – SVN-U.S., 1972," Box 18, Lot 75D336, RG 59, NARA; "Thieu Bows, Will Soften Press Law," *Washington Post*, 3 September 1972.

political prisoners. The CIA believed that he held far more, however, and his aides admitted that Saigon took at least 40,000 prisoners in the fall of 1972 alone. In November, Thieu also unveiled the Democracy Party. In 1969, he told Bunker that he could not associate too closely with Lien Minh, because his people might fear the emergence of a new Diem-style dictatorship. The organization that Thieu created in 1972 mirrored the Can Lao Party by granting the president greater control over his bureaucracy. Under new regulations, moreover, the Democracy Party was the only national party legally allowed on electoral ballots.<sup>33</sup>

Most Nixon administration officials did not care that Thieu was abusing his authority. On August 17, Kissinger discussed Thieu with NSC staffers, Bunker, and the CIA's Saigon station chief, Thomas Polgar. The latter claimed that the Republic of Vietnam was strong, and that Thieu had more supporters than American newspapers acknowledged. Kissinger mimicked Thieu's critics: "He's a corrupt military dictator!" Polgar did not shy away from that accusation: "That's correct—but he has a following." Kissinger could not have agreed more: "A corrupt military dictator is an ally who resists our enemies!" The national security adviser was well aware of Saigon's brutal treatment of dissidents. When Polgar claimed that many captured enemy cadres spoke freely when interrogated without torture, Kissinger quipped, "I must say if I were in the hands of the [Government of Vietnam], I'd talk without torture too!"<sup>34</sup>

National Security Council staffer William Stearman cast State Department criticisms of Thieu's repression, particularly the continued incarceration of 1967 peace

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<sup>33</sup> Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 484-485; "Thieu Assumes Broad Powers," *Washington Post*, 4 September 1972. For Thieu's attitudes toward Lien Minh, see Chapter 2.

<sup>34</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 17 August 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 839-846 (Document 242).

candidate Truong Dinh Dzu, as “a prime example of overreacting to initial, scattered reporting and of imposing their judgment of American political reactions on the Thieu regime.” Stearman argued that Thieu was only trying to “limit the permissiveness of Vietnamese political life and thereby to better prepare the [Government of Vietnam] for a ceasefire.”<sup>35</sup> The NSC staffer maintained that Thieu’s dictatorial behavior was actually good for the White House, because it strengthened the South Vietnamese government. “Since we have long criticized the disorder of South Vietnam’s politics, should we now urge Thieu to ease off on measures designed primarily to remedy the South’s chronic permissiveness?”<sup>36</sup>

Thieu sometimes catered to American prejudices in order to justify enhancing his personal authority. For example, on September 10, he announced to the American press that democracy was a Western institution, and should not be applied to an “Oriental society.”<sup>37</sup> Despite the continued public outcry over Thieu’s methods, Nixon did not intervene. Negroponte even advised Nixon to tell Bunker that the Oval Office appreciated Thieu’s tough new decree laws on corruption and narcotics. A new anti-drug law established the death penalty for dealers who sold drugs like heroin and cocaine. Hijackers, armed robbers, rapists, and pimps also faced capital punishment.<sup>38</sup> While such

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<sup>35</sup> Memorandum From William L. Stearman of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), 18 August 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 869-871 (Document 244). The draft Deptel is attached to Stearman’s memo.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Craig R. Whitney, “Vietnam: Democracy was Very Disorderly,” *New York Times*, 10 September 1972, pg. E3.

<sup>38</sup> “Thieu Assumes Broad Powers,” *Washington Post*, 4 September 1972; “Press Restrictions in South Vietnam,” *Wall Street Journal*, 7 September 1972; “Why Fight On for President Thieu?” *Washington Post*, 11 September 1972; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 23, S: 30049; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 23, S:

harsh penalties would never be accepted in American law, the Nixon administration believed the South Vietnamese, because of their barbaric nature, needed stronger incentives to behave.

In 1972, Thieu's executive powers expanded exponentially as he tightened his grip on South Vietnam. The Nixon administration not only failed to protest this development, it also forbade certain US officials from airing their displeasure with Thieu's authoritarianism. According to the White House, extreme measures were needed to rebuff the Spring Offensive and protect the Republic of Vietnam in case the NLF was allowed into the political arena as part of a postwar settlement.<sup>39</sup> A callous disregard for the South Vietnamese people also stopped the White House from protesting to Thieu. Kissinger joked about torture in Saigon's prisons, while certain members of the NSC expressed support for Thieu's dictatorship.

## CLASHING WITH A MANDARIN

For nearly four years, the White House had enjoyed a generally good rapport with Independence Palace, but the alliance nearly fell apart in late 1972. The tensions that began to mount over the peace process in 1971 came to a head as Kissinger made rapid

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30714; "The World: Thunderbolt from Thieu," *Time*, 18 September 1972; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 25, S: 32685-32686; *CR*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972. Vol. 118, pt. 26, S: 34841-34854; Memorandum from John Negroponte to Kissinger: Talking Points for the President's Meeting with Ambassador Bunker, 30 August 1972, Box 161, Folder 3, NSCF, VCF, RNLN; "Thieu Orders Death for Drug Pushers," *Washington Post*, 14 August 1972, pg. A17; "Thieu Assumes Broad Powers," *Washington Post*, 4 September 1972.

<sup>39</sup> Memorandum from John Holdridge to Kissinger: GVN Land Reform and Other Cease-Fire Preparations, 19 October 1972, Box 162, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLN; Backchannel Message From the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 30 December 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 875-878 (Document 239).

progress toward a final settlement. Nixon and Kissinger were determined to end America's role in the war quickly, and neither was willing to compromise on this issue in any significant way. Since the American peace plan put Saigon at a disadvantage, Thieu understandably refused to have any part in it.<sup>40</sup> Nixon and Kissinger tried to browbeat their ally into submission, frequently flying into rages over Thieu's resistance to the agreement. As the most important benefactor holding the Thieu regime afloat, Washington had the leverage it needed to achieve its goals. Nixon's approach to the Paris peace process virtually guaranteed that Thieu would not survive much longer than a decent interval.

The first major tensions of the year erupted after Nixon publicized the secret negotiations in Paris on January 25. Although the president argued that the communists were the chief obstacles to peace, Thieu was furious that Nixon did not explicitly demand that any peace settlement require the withdrawal of enemy forces from South Vietnam. In preparation for the speech, Bunker informed Thieu that Washington had offered Hanoi a peace deal that required the South Vietnamese president to resign one month before a postwar general election. Back in September 1971, Haig had presented a new draft peace proposal, including provisions for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops, prisoner of war exchanges, and elections governed by a commission that included

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<sup>40</sup> Most historical accounts of the peace process are sympathetic to Thieu's plight. See, for example: Ambrose, *Triumph of a Politician*, Vol. 2; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon. Ruin and Recovery, 1973–1990*, Vol. 3 of *Nixon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*; Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*; Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*; Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*; Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975; Sorley, *A Better War*. For less critical reviews, see: Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace*; Kissinger, *White House Years*; Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace*.



communist representatives. Thieu accepted this proposal three days later, mostly because Haig argued that Hanoi would not accept such a deal. Thieu left this meeting with the expectation that he would be informed before Washington offered the resignation concession to Hanoi. Nobody consulted him before the US delegation in Paris made this offer on November 20, though. Bunker apologized for failing to keep Thieu apprised of the negotiations, and Nixon modified his January 25 speech to create the impression that Thieu had been fully involved. Still, Thieu had yet another reason to question American intentions.<sup>41</sup>

In February, Rogers added to Thieu's worries by elaborating on what he believed should happen after Thieu resigned. The White House expected a caretaker administration to supervise the creation of a new, permanent government in Saigon. Rogers stated publicly that the White House was flexible about its form, which Thieu interpreted as official US endorsement of a coalition government. The South Vietnamese president vented his frustration publicly, and Kissinger sympathized with him. Washington had devised the caretaker government scheme, but Kissinger preferred to let Thieu take the credit and claimed that the White House had never considered letting a coalition government take power. Kissinger feared that Rogers' statement would encourage a coup. Nixon told the US press that he would not make decisions about a peace settlement without consulting Saigon, but the incident demonstrated just how tenuous the alliance with Thieu had become.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 112-118; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 45-48.

<sup>42</sup> Conversation with Nixon, 11:35 AM, 10 February 1972, Box 13, Folder 3, HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM; Conversation with the Attorney General, 2:10 PM, 10 February 1972, Box 13, Folder 3, HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM; Craig R. Whitney, "Thieu,

Despite the tensions Washington created with Saigon over Nixon's January 25 speech, it did not actually mark progress in the peace process. Designed primarily to shore up the president's domestic political support by allowing him to posture as a peacemaker, it did not include a new proposal. The negotiations then stalled during the Spring Offensive, delaying further progress for several months.<sup>43</sup> A breakthrough came at the end of May, when Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev offered to pass Washington's current negotiating position to Hanoi. In his description of that position to Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Kissinger explained that the White House would not remove Thieu from office "by its own hands," but nor would it intervene if a communist government eventually took power in Saigon. He also recommended forming a tripartite electoral commission that included members from the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), the political arm of the NLF; neutralists; and representatives of the Thieu regime. Kissinger hinted that this body could lead to a coalition government, and that "the idea of a coalition" could be introduced into the Commission procedures in "camouflaged form."<sup>44</sup> American officials did not inform Thieu of this concession, for obvious reasons.<sup>45</sup>

As the negotiations progressed, the White House knew it was heading toward a confrontation with Thieu. A State Department policy paper in May argued that Thieu would never agree to a ceasefire-in-place, which he had repeatedly denounced as akin to surrender. The policy paper therefore recommended pushing Thieu to annex as much

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Criticizing Rogers, Rejects New Concessions," *New York Times*, 11 February 1972; "Thieu Bars New Peace Concessions," *Washington Post*, 11 February 1972.

<sup>43</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 123; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 297-313.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 318.

<sup>45</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 135.

enemy-controlled land in South Vietnam as possible, so he would be in a stronger position when a ceasefire took effect.<sup>46</sup> Nixon dismissed Kissinger's fear that Thieu would not like some elements of any ceasefire agreement. "If he doesn't like it," Nixon interjected, "that's too bad."<sup>47</sup>

Both men nonetheless insisted on July 19 that they could not "flush Thieu" right away.<sup>48</sup> Six days later, Kissinger explained to Nixon that Hanoi proposed to let the caretaker government negotiate with the PRG to draft a new constitution. Kissinger saw this as an obvious ploy to eliminate Thieu, and suggested that a new, elected government—excluding Thieu—could better manage negotiations for a constitution than an appointed caretaker administration. Kissinger did not think this scheme represented a betrayal of Saigon, because Thieu could participate in the talks regarding the elections. Kissinger wanted to present this proposal to Hanoi without first consulting Thieu, "because he'll just go into orbit" if he heard that Washington was offering to change the South Vietnamese constitution. If the North Vietnamese rejected the deal, Kissinger doubted that Thieu would care it was offered. If they accepted, the White House would have difficulty trying to bring Saigon along. The NLF did not want to live under the 1967 constitution, however, and this offered a way around that problem. Kissinger accepted that Washington could not "screw Thieu," lest hard-line American hawks withhold their support for the Republicans in the upcoming US presidential election, but he believed

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<sup>46</sup> Memorandum: Possible North Vietnamese Ceasefire Offer, May 1972 [Exact Day Unknown], "Policy Papers," Box 28, Lot 76D431, RG 59, NARA.

<sup>47</sup> Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 8 May 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 509510 (Document 134).

<sup>48</sup> Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, Old Executive Office Building, 19 July 1972, 9:45 p.m. – 10:30 p.m., WHT, Conversation 348-15.

that his proposal represented a fair compromise. Nixon was aware that Saigon might object, but was adamant that “We’ve gone as far... as we can with Thieu.”<sup>49</sup>

Following the reversals of the Spring Offensive, the North Vietnamese Politburo decided in June or July to pursue negotiations in earnest. Hanoi dropped its demand that Thieu resign before the formation of a provisional coalition government that would take over negotiations with the PRG.<sup>50</sup> On August 17 and 18, Kissinger met Thieu to discuss the agreement that was taking shape. He tried to appease Thieu by rejecting press speculation that Washington would impose a coalition government, but tensions nonetheless arose between the two men. Kissinger brought only English-language versions of the North Vietnamese proposals, which were of limited use in Saigon. The US national security adviser also suggested that Washington might seek a bilateral agreement with Hanoi. When Thieu asked if the White House would accept a ceasefire in exchange for the release of American POWs, and thus leave South Vietnam vulnerable, Kissinger admitted that he would.<sup>51</sup>

Thieu’s two greatest objections to Kissinger’s proposal were the abandonment of Washington’s demand for mutual withdrawals of non-South Vietnamese armed forces, and the imposition of a tripartite electoral commission to form a new government. Thieu refused to participate in any forum with the PRG, because that might imply that there

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<sup>49</sup> Conversation between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 25 July 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 758-761 (Document 216).

<sup>50</sup> Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 320; Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 321-322.

<sup>51</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 322-323, 329-333; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 141-144; Memorandum of Conversation, 17 August 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 847-869 (Document 243); Memorandum of Conversation, 18 August 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 872-895 (Document 245).

were two legitimate governments in South Vietnam. To allay Thieu's fears, Kissinger suggested it might be better to delay the peace agreement until after Nixon's re-election, when it would be possible to resume the bombing of North Vietnam. The national security adviser failed to convince Thieu to cooperate, though. On September 13, Thieu formally rejected the proposal for the tripartite electoral commission, now called the Committee of National Reconciliation (CNR).<sup>52</sup>

Thieu had never been comfortable letting the Americans negotiate on behalf of his government, so he publicly railed against the CNR and, on September 26, sent a memo to Kissinger calling for the Vietnamization of negotiations.<sup>53</sup> Thieu's protests bolstered his standing at home, but enraged Kissinger, who viewed the South Vietnamese as ungrateful for American sacrifices in Southeast Asia. "Appreciation for services rendered," he later wrote in his memoirs, "is not a Vietnamese trait."<sup>54</sup> Kissinger charged that Thieu had dismissed ceasefire proposals because he believed he was winning the war, but Nixon vowed to forge ahead with negotiations anyway.<sup>55</sup> Thieu was no longer Washington's superman, and was henceforth treated like the rest of the South Vietnamese.

On September 28, Kissinger convinced Nixon to pursue a settlement in earnest, arguing that the US negotiating position was not a sell-out of South Vietnam. Nixon sent General Haig on a futile mission to bring Thieu along on such a deal. At first worried that

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<sup>52</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 329-333; Memorandum of Conversation, 17 August 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 847-869 (Document 243); Memorandum of Conversation, 18 August 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 872-895 (Document 245).

<sup>53</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 148; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 108-109.

<sup>54</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 149.

<sup>55</sup> Conversation Between President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 29 September 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 1003-1009 (Document 270).

Thieu's resistance would cause political problems for the White House, the US president eventually came around to Kissinger's position. Nixon even threatened to instigate a coup in Saigon if Thieu did not sign the accords.<sup>56</sup> A presidential letter dated October 6 warned Thieu to stop resisting the American peace program, lest he put himself in a position similar to Ngo Dinh Diem's in 1963.<sup>57</sup> Nixon did not explicitly threaten to have Thieu murdered, but given what happened to Diem, the death threat was clearly implied. Nixon was bluffing. There were various contingency plans floating around the White House in 1971 and 1972 about what would happen if Thieu was assassinated or otherwise indisposed. There is currently no direct evidence that senior officials seriously considered assassinating Thieu, though. Indeed, Nixon was convinced that Kennedy had been wrong to support the 1963 coup, and was similarly disposed towards American schemes to eliminate Thieu.<sup>58</sup>

Kissinger had little patience for Thieu's stubbornness, and believed firmly that the South Vietnamese president was simply being unreasonable. On September 29, Kissinger met a small group of news editors. Kissinger shocked *Time* magazine's Jerrold Schecter

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<sup>56</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 318; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 329-337.

<sup>57</sup> Backchannel Message from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to South Vietnam, 6 October 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 1072-1073 (Document 282).

<sup>58</sup> Memorandum from John Negroponte to Alexander Haig: Possible Consequences of Thieu Assassination, 14 September 1971, Box 157, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, 3 May 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 398-402 (Document 115); Memorandum from Phil Odeen to Alexander Haig: Alternative GVN Leadership, 20 October 1972, Box 162, Folder 1, NSCF, VCF, RNLM; Transcript of a Telephone Conversation between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 19 August 1971, *FRUS*, July 1970-January 1972, Vol. VII: 881-882 (Document 248). Haig denied allegations that the US government ever seriously considered eliminating Thieu. See Alexander Haig, Jr. with Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World: A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 307.

with the way that he dismissed Saigon's concerns: "'Our problem with the Vietnamese,' said Kissinger, 'is that one of them [North or South] always thinks he's winning, and generosity is not one of their attributes.'" Kissinger lamented both Thieu and Le Duc Tho's perspectives on the negotiations, which he believed were shaped by this caricature of Vietnamese culture.<sup>59</sup>

Haig visited Saigon on October 2, and arranged to meet Thieu in order to explain Nixon's thoughts on the peace process. Thieu listened attentively, asked a few questions, and convinced Haig that Saigon was still interested in cooperating with the White House. Thieu then cancelled their next appointment without explanation, and brought his entire national security council to the following meeting on October 4. The South Vietnamese officials protested the CNR and tacit recognition of the NLF in the draft agreement. Thieu claimed that Hanoi had outsmarted Kissinger, and that the US national security advisor was betraying South Vietnam in the peace negotiations. Haig explained that Hanoi had also made some concessions, particularly by dropping their demands that the entire Thieu regime resign. Thieu scoffed, noting that nobody called on North Vietnamese officials to resign: Kissinger "does not deign to accept [South Vietnamese] views, but wants to go his own way." The meeting ended on a sour note, with Thieu driven to tears.<sup>60</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger were still concerned that a public break with Saigon over the peace negotiations could hamper the US president's re-election campaign. Kissinger, in Machiavellian fashion, suggested: "One possibility, if we're going to be cold-blooded

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<sup>59</sup> Hung and Schecter, *The Palace Files*, 91. Brackets in original.

<sup>60</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 149-153; Memorandum of Conversation, 4 October 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 1028-1046 (Document 277).

about it is to settle [the war] with the North Vietnamese and hold [off announcing the peace agreement] until after the election in return for their being quiet during this period.” Nixon and Kissinger decided to send Bunker to see Thieu, first, in another attempt to convince Saigon to cooperate on the peace deal. While Washington might suffer some short-term setbacks as a result of Thieu’s obstinacy, the US president’s patience was fading quickly. Nixon was already contemplating the abandonment of Thieu. “You know, if he’s going to be unreasonable, I mean the tail can’t wag the dog here.” The president then suggested that Kissinger could offer Le Duc Tho a proposal that was just shy of acceptable to Hanoi. After the election, Kissinger could issue a more palatable peace proposal and “the hell with Thieu.”<sup>61</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger were not the only American policymakers who grew frustrated with Thieu. Bunker sympathized with Saigon’s frustration over the rapid pace of events, but he revealed his own prejudices when he claimed that a “suspicious nature—a characteristic of all Vietnamese” was “developed to a high degree in Thieu,” who “can’t completely rid himself of this characteristic even when he considers relations with the U.S.” Bunker cast Thieu’s resistance as a demonstration of pride and a cultural obsession with saving “face,” which the ambassador claimed was common in “the Asian concept and [in] the Mandarin structure of society.”<sup>62</sup> Prejudices about the Vietnamese

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<sup>61</sup> Transcript of a Telephone Conversation between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 4 October 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 1050-1067 (Document 279).

<sup>62</sup> Backchannel Message From the Ambassador to South Vietnam (Bunker) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 5 October 1972, *FRUS*, January-October 1972, Vol. VIII: 1070-1071 (Document 281); Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 83.



national character conveniently allowed US officials to ignore Thieu's attempts to shape the draft peace agreements.

On October 8, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho reached another breakthrough. The North Vietnamese delegate produced a new draft peace plan that abandoned the tripartite electoral commission in favor of a new administrative body (the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord, NCNRC) designed to implement the peace agreements, resolve political differences between the PRG and Thieu regime, and run elections. Hanoi also proposed a ceasefire-in place, which required all belligerent forces to remain where they stood, rather than withdraw to pre-established regions. Under this plan, North Vietnamese soldiers could remain in the South, a concern Thieu had raised in 1970. Le Duc Tho also agreed to separate negotiations on political and military issues, and conceded Washington's right to replace South Vietnamese war materiel as it was consumed. Finally, Hanoi no longer demanded Thieu's resignation before the peace process could begin. Kissinger concluded that the North Vietnamese had accepted all of Nixon's demands.<sup>63</sup>

Kissinger travelled to Independence Palace on October 18 to convey Nixon's request that Saigon accept Hanoi's latest offer. Thieu was already prepared to obstruct the new agreement, because South Vietnamese forces had captured enemy documents that included details about Le Duc Tho's proposal and instructions for violating the ceasefire. Thieu was outraged that his enemies had the details of the agreement before he did, and Kissinger further offended the South Vietnamese president by again providing only an English-language copy of the draft. Thieu had several objections to the new proposal.

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<sup>63</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 338-339; Randolph, *Brutal and Powerful Weapons*, 324-325; Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 79-85.

First, the draft described “three nations of Indochina,” which implied that one of the Vietnamese governments was illegitimate. Second, the draft described the NCNRC as an “administrative structure,” which in Vietnamese is very similar to “governmental structure.” Such terminology implied that the NCNRC would become a coalition government. Kissinger vainly protested that this body would have no official powers. Finally, Thieu objected to letting North Vietnamese forces remain in the South. Kissinger explained that Hanoi would not agree to a provision requiring PAVN withdrawals. Thieu, however, distrusted the language of the Paris agreement, which implied that Northern troops should be treated as though they were Southerners.<sup>64</sup> Later, Thieu explained that he “wanted to punch Kissinger in the mouth.”<sup>65</sup>

Kissinger’s meeting with Saigon’s National Security Council on October 20 did nothing to alleviate Thieu’s fears. After a lengthy conversation, Kissinger concluded that the South Vietnamese “are having great psychological difficulty with cutting the American umbilical cord.” While the South Vietnamese expressed confidence in their generals, they nonetheless feared that the government would collapse if the communists violated a peace treaty. Kissinger knew, however, that the South Vietnamese were also obstructing the peace talks because they had been excluded from the negotiations. The national security adviser lamented that “their self-respect requires a sense of participation” in discussions about the future of their country.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 311-312; Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 83-90; Porter, *A Peace Denied*, 125-126, 137-139; Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 326.

<sup>65</sup> Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 90.

<sup>66</sup> Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the White House, 20 October 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 215-217 (Document 32).

At the suggestion of Hoang Duc Nha, his cousin and close adviser, Thieu cancelled a 5:00 meeting with the Americans and refused to take their calls. When the embassy called Independence Palace for an explanation, Kissinger exploded: “I am the Special Envoy of the President of the United States of America. You know I cannot be treated as an errand boy.” Still, Thieu refused Kissinger’s demand for an immediate meeting, and now had another reason not to sign the draft peace agreement. In an interview with *Newsweek*, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong implied that the NCNRC was a disguised coalition government. Kissinger planned to explain the US position on this statement when he called on October 20, but Thieu refused to speak to him. When they finally met the following day, Kissinger forgot to comment on the *Newsweek* interview and instead conveyed Nixon’s threat to cut off aid if Thieu did not sign the peace accords.<sup>67</sup>

Thieu believed Hanoi had tricked Kissinger into endorsing a bad peace agreement. The South Vietnamese president also resented American attempts to conjure political pressure on Thieu to sign. Kissinger left Saigon briefly to meet Lon Nol in Cambodia, before returning to Independence Palace on October 22. Thieu alleged that before his departure Kissinger had instructed American officials to spread rumors that Saigon had agreed to sign the treaty. The accusation enraged Kissinger, and the conversation devolved further after Thieu formally refused to sign the agreement. Kissinger accused Thieu of being an obstacle to peace. In return, Thieu charged that Kissinger was plotting the destruction of South Vietnam and said he had resented the way US officials had treated him ever since they had asked him to resign. Kissinger tried

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<sup>67</sup> Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 98-102; Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 345; Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 98-99.

again to convince Thieu that the agreement would secure South Vietnamese sovereignty, to no avail.<sup>68</sup> Before leaving, Kissinger despaired, “I’m not going to come back to South Vietnam. This is the greatest diplomatic failure of my career.” Thieu shot back sarcastically, “Why are you rushing to get the Nobel prize?”<sup>69</sup> Kissinger cabled Haig, claiming Thieu’s “demands verge on insanity.”<sup>70</sup> Two days later, after Kissinger departed, Thieu announced his rejection of the Accords to the National Assembly.<sup>71</sup>

Thieu despised Kissinger, but he appears to have still considered Nixon a loyal ally who had been misled by his national security adviser. Thieu tried to appeal directly to Nixon, but Kissinger drafted the US president’s response, which adamantly denied any difference of opinion between the two senior American policymakers. Nixon was himself more concerned about Thieu’s predilection toward skullduggery than Kissinger’s. He told Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman that not even Kissinger understood how devious Thieu could be. Throughout October, the US president fluctuated between insisting that only Thieu could protect South Vietnam and exhorting a bilateral agreement with the North if Saigon continued to obstruct the peace process.<sup>72</sup> On balance, though, Nixon leaned toward taking a tougher approach with Thieu, because prolonging the war was no longer in American national interests. As Nixon put it on October 6, “we cannot keep this child

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<sup>68</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 167; Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 102-106.

<sup>69</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 105.

<sup>70</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 170.

<sup>71</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 342.

<sup>72</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 113-115; Conversation between Nixon and Haldeman, CDST, 22 October, 9:57 a.m. – 10:09 a.m., WHT, Conversation 151-9; Conversation between Nixon and Haig, CDST, 22 October, 10:10 a.m. – 10:16 a.m., WHT, Conversation 151-11; Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, Oval Office [Hereafter, OO], 14 October, 10:03 a.m. – 10:39 a.m., WHT, Conversation 798-4.

sucking at the tit when the child is four years old.”<sup>73</sup> Again, Nixon infantilized Thieu, suggesting he needed paternal guidance.

As the divisions between Saigon and Washington widened, Nixon decided that forcing an agreement before the election was no longer necessary. He did not believe he needed to settle the war to win a second term, and he still worried that attacks from Thieu might diminish his support among American conservatives. Nixon also feared that Kissinger would either steal credit for achieving a settlement or make the president a scapegoat for failure.<sup>74</sup> In December, the president confided to Haldeman that Kissinger had had lost “touch with reality” in his zeal for the negotiations.<sup>75</sup> By late October, however, Kissinger had also decided to delay the negotiations if Thieu remained obstinate. He too worried about the domestic political consequences of Thieu’s resistance, and feared that Nixon would blame him if the negotiations stalemated.<sup>76</sup>

Nixon returned to office in a landslide victory on November 7. His post-election strategy for Vietnam was to convince and cajole Saigon into accepting the agreement by seeking some revisions in the draft and threatening to cut off aid. As a fallback position, the White House could convince Congress to cut off foreign assistance and let South Vietnam fall. American credibility would be damaged, but the legislature could serve as a scapegoat. Nixon sent Alexander Haig to Saigon as his envoy, because was more appealing to Thieu than Kissinger.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, OO, 6 October, 9:30 a.m. – 10:03 a.m., WHt, Conversation 793-6.

<sup>74</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 312-313; Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 343-344

<sup>75</sup> H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994), 547-548.

<sup>76</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 344.

<sup>77</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 348; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 120-121.

Haig brought with him another letter from Nixon, originally drafted by Kissinger, which included incentives for cooperation and threats of punishment for further obstruction of the peace process. Hoping to endear himself to Thieu, Nixon reminded Saigon of the benefits it received from Operation Enhance Plus. In August, Washington had increased its shipments of military equipment to Saigon, a project dubbed Enhance. When that effort was deemed insufficient, Washington initiated Enhance Plus to supplement its predecessor. The purpose of this new program was to ship all military equipment allocated for 1973 to South Vietnam before a ceasefire was signed. Obviously, the program was a boon to Thieu; when the operation was complete, he had the world's fourth largest air force.<sup>78</sup>

In the letter Haig took to Saigon, Nixon also promised to retaliate if Hanoi violated the ceasefire, and to seek some revisions in the draft agreement. He would try to have the disturbing language about the NCNRC "administration" sorted out, and to weaken that organization. Nixon also vowed to eliminate the reference to "three Indochinese states." He promised to call for the de facto, if not de jure, withdrawal of "some North Vietnamese divisions" from the South, and to introduce wording that required Hanoi to demobilize and recall its soldiers. Nixon also insisted that Thieu end his "distortions of the agreement" in the press, which the White House considered "self-defeating." Haig warned that Washington would "take brutal action" if Thieu did not sign the accords. In a letter dated November 14, Nixon rejected most of the other changes that Thieu demanded to the language of the draft. Thieu responded with a list of objectionable clauses in the peace plan, most importantly the provisions allowing PAVN to remain in

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<sup>78</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 315; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 348-349; Haig, Jr. with McCarry, *Inner Circles*, 304

the South and description of the NCNRC as an administrative body. Nixon expressed his frustration in another letter on November 18: “I wish to leave you under no illusion, however, that we can or will go beyond these changes in seeking to improve an agreement that we already consider to be excellent.”<sup>79</sup>

Nixon’s latter two letters were decidedly less harsh than his earlier correspondence. His change of tone reflected Haig’s report of the November 11 meeting. The general acknowledged that Thieu still opposed the North Vietnamese troops presence in South Vietnam, but he hoped that Saigon would eventually accept a less-than-perfect guarantee of PAVN’s retreat. While North Vietnamese diplomats were unwilling to accept any language in the accords that demanded such withdrawals, Haig doubted that Thieu would cooperate unless Washington at least explored the possibility. Thieu took some comfort in the US president’s promises to enforce the ceasefire, but he was disheartened to learn that Nixon would not accept a South Vietnamese emissary before the accords were signed. Thieu had hoped to bypass Kissinger with an envoy, and place his case against the accords directly before Nixon. Haig’s mission to bring Thieu on board had clearly failed.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 348-349; Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 121. Nixon’s letters from November 8, 14, and 18 are available in Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, Appendix A: Letter 12, 383-390. Haig found these meetings difficult to endure, in part because he believed that Thieu’s position had merit. On October 22, he told Nixon that the NCNRC was indeed a coalition government, but the president demanded that Haig avoid using that term. Later, in his memoirs, Haig admitted that Thieu’s resistance to the Peace Accords was morally defensible, but impractical because the US Congress would not have funded a continued war effort. See Conversation between Nixon and Haig, CDST, 22 October 1972, 12:22 a.m. – 12:27 a.m., WHT, Conversation 151-7; Haig, Jr. with McCarty, *Inner Circles*, 293.

<sup>80</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 124-127; Backchannel Message From the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 11 November 1972, *FRUS*, October

Despite the tough language in his letters, Nixon acknowledged that the presence of PAVN soldiers in the South was a danger to the Thieu regime. Of course, they were just as dangerous across the border, but Thieu was concerned about legitimizing his enemies' presence in the South. Nixon believed that this problem could be remedied with some ambiguous language in the agreement, which demanded that Hanoi withdraw its soldiers but was deliberately vague about how that would happen. Kissinger claimed that it was to Thieu's advantage that Hanoi denied PAVN's presence in the South. After taking that position, the North Vietnamese could not later claim a right to keep their troops on enemy soil.<sup>81</sup>

As Nixon's tone toward Thieu was becoming more moderate, Kissinger only grew angrier. On November 15, he cursed "that goddamn Thieu" for delaying meetings with Bunker to discuss the peace process, and then demanding another day to study the latest version of the agreement.<sup>82</sup> Two days later, Kissinger instructed Bunker to tell Saigon that Washington would try to implement some of the changes that Thieu demanded in the draft, but not all of them. Kissinger would attempt to change the Vietnamese description of the NCNRC as an "administrative structure" and rephrase a provision for "national elections" as "general elections." He dismissed Thieu's other

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1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 377-382 (Document 99); Message From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 13 November 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 387-389 (Document 103).

<sup>81</sup> Conversation with Nixon, 9:35 AM, 14 November 1972, Box 17, Folder 2, HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM.

<sup>82</sup> Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger): 15 November 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 398-400 (Document 108).



demands because they would have derailed the negotiations.<sup>83</sup> When Thieu gave no indication that he was going to concede defeat, Nixon ordered Kissinger to seek an agreement in Paris anyway.<sup>84</sup>

Kissinger then returned to negotiations with Le Duc Tho, meeting him in late November, early-to-mid December, and early January 1973. Kissinger presented, but eventually dropped, most of Thieu's demands during the first series of meetings. He did, however, hold fast on the issues Nixon had promised to remedy, namely the description of the NCNRC, the provisions for partial PAVN withdrawals, and the replacement of "worn out" and "used up" South Vietnamese military equipment. Le Duc Tho, however, proved a tough negotiator, who gave little ground. He also changed or hardened his positions on other issues. Dissatisfied with North Vietnamese stubbornness, Nixon ordered Kissinger to halt the talks if Hanoi was not more flexible. The president also told Kissinger to reference the earlier Linebacker bombings, in order to scare Le Duc Tho into compromising the North Vietnamese negotiating position. The next day, Kissinger engaged in another round of fruitless talks. Nixon ordered Kissinger to abandon the negotiations, but a series of strange and contradictory messages from the president confused the national security adviser. Kissinger ignored the order and met Le

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<sup>83</sup> Backchannel Message From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to the Ambassador to Vietnam (Bunker), 17 November 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 412-416 (Document 110).

<sup>84</sup> Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 18 November 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 419-421 (Document 112).

Duc Tho again to convey Nixon's threat of military retaliation. The talks stalled on November 25.<sup>85</sup>

Four days later, Nixon met Nguyen Phu Duc, Thieu's special assistant, and Ambassador Tran Kim Phuong, Bui Diem's replacement, to discuss the negotiations.<sup>86</sup> Kissinger gave the president a briefing paper for the meeting in which he claimed that the purpose of the gathering was to "convince an almost psychopathically distrustful Thieu... to close ranks with us this week on the Paris agreement." Kissinger complained that "this shrewd, paranoid (sic) Mandarin" had bolstered his domestic political support by refusing to follow the American lead. Kissinger advised Nixon to combine "brutality with reassurance," threatening to go to Paris alone while offering to retaliate if Hanoi violated the agreement.<sup>87</sup>

During the meeting, Nixon told Duc that Congressional opinion was working against Saigon, and that it was important to sign the Paris agreement. Historian Pierre Asselin argues, however, that this warning was a ploy to convince Thieu to sign the agreement and protect Saigon's faith in Washington. Nixon could not threaten to abandon South Vietnam without surrendering all justification for asking Thieu to trust him. To avoid this pitfall, he blamed Congress for threatening to cut off aid. Nixon reaffirmed his pledge to retaliate if Hanoi attacked the South after an agreement was ratified, explaining that he could dispatch bombers based in Thailand against enemy targets.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 313-314; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 349-354; Porter, *A Peace Denied*, 144-152.

<sup>86</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 136.

<sup>87</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, 28 November 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 475-479 (Document 129).

<sup>88</sup> Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 125; Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 136-137.

Thieu was comforted to hear these plans, but Nixon also told Duc and Phuong that continued opposition to the peace deal on the table would have a deleterious effect on US-South Vietnamese relations. Nixon was not nearly as aggressive with Thieu's envoys as he had been in private conversations with Kissinger, however, and Thieu was not cowed into submission. Over the next several weeks, Thieu continued to protest the draft the peace agreements. He even released his own proposal suggesting that Saigon and Hanoi could sign a separate ceasefire, negotiate POW releases, and discuss a political settlement on their own. Thieu recommended establishing a month-long truce over the holidays, during which all foreign troops—including the North Vietnamese—would leave the South. Thieu, Huong, and Khiem would then resign so ARVN General Tran Van Don could oversee elections for a new government. Hanoi would not agree to these terms. Saigon's scheme virtually guaranteed Thieu's re-election, and Independence Palace would still be eligible for American foreign assistance under the proposal. Washington could not accept Thieu's plans, either, because it amounted to a repudiation of Kissinger's efforts.<sup>89</sup>

When Kissinger reported on Duc's presentation of Thieu's proposal, he called the South Vietnamese envoy a "little bastard." He had no kinder words for Hoang Duc Nha, whom he described as a "punk kid" who was "acting out a Wagnerian drama."<sup>90</sup> In fact, Kissinger was growing increasingly frustrated with both Vietnamese parties. Jerrold Schecter recalled that the national security adviser "compared [the North and South

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<sup>89</sup> Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 355; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 136-137; Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 139-141.

<sup>90</sup> Conversation Among President Nixon, the Assistant to the President (Haldeman), and the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 30 November 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 491-493 (Document 133).

Vietnamese] to tigers balanced on stools in a cage.” Kissinger, by extension, was their trainer, “cracking the whip to force the recalcitrant beasts to go through their paces.”<sup>91</sup>

This was the problem with Kissinger’s approach to Saigon. He thought of the South Vietnamese as animals that needed punishment, rather than as negotiating partners.

Kissinger’s comments were not a one-time misstep. His frustrations with the peace process manifested in virulent racism. In early December, Kissinger met with the South Vietnamese delegation in Paris to explain that he had been unable to force Hanoi to withdraw its soldiers from the South. When Ambassador Phuong asked about removing references to the PRG in the draft, Kissinger lashed out: “I know you gentlemen will be elated when this breaks down, and Mr. Nha will have a celebration for a month....” Exasperated, Kissinger complained to Phuong that, “you are a time-consuming race.” Kissinger ended the meeting by pledging swift American retaliation if Hanoi violated the agreement, but such worn-out promises had never been effective.<sup>92</sup>

Nixon, too, was reaching the limits of his patience. In a conversation with Haig on December 12, the president complained that Thieu “has really destroyed his usefulness, and, frankly, his credibility as far as our dealing with him on an equal basis from now on.” Haig readily agreed: “And, with this, there can be no moral, or any other consideration, with respect to this guy from now on. We’ve got to play this on pure self-interest, totally.” Haig claimed that Thieu, “in his Mandarin style,” was afraid of a postwar political contest with the enemy.<sup>93</sup> Switching metaphors later in the day, Haig

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<sup>91</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 109.

<sup>92</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 209-211. Brackets added by Berman.

<sup>93</sup> Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), 12 December 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 581-589 (Document 161).

complained that Thieu had gone “off the reservation” with his resistance to the peace talks.<sup>94</sup>

The next round of talks resolved most of the differences between Hanoi and Washington, although Saigon still could not accept the draft agreement. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho only needed to wrap up a few remaining issues with the accords: the possibility of referencing the PRG in the text of the agreement (which Thieu opposed because he did not want to recognize the insurgents as a legal entity); the status of the demilitarized zone as either a national border or provisional line between two parties to a civil war; and rules regarding movement across the demilitarized zone. Le Duc Tho recommended that the Politburo accept the American position on the demilitarized zone, in order to facilitate a final settlement. While he did not think that Washington could sustain combat in Vietnam much longer, he feared the Americans would launch a brief, but devastating attack on the North. Hanoi rejected Le Duc Tho’s recommendation and the communist negotiators returned to the talks with several objections to the language in the draft agreement, including references to the PRG. Le Duc Tho returned to Hanoi for consultations on December 14, after the negotiations bogged down.<sup>95</sup>

Nixon’s response to the impasse was Operation Linebacker II, also known as the Christmas Bombings, which targeted Hanoi and Haiphong with the full fury of American airpower. The president knew that Linebacker II would be insufficient to convince Thieu to sign the peace agreement, so he considered sending Vice President Spiro Agnew to warn Independence Palace that all US aid would be shut off if Saigon did not sign the

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<sup>94</sup> Conversation between Nixon and Haig, OO, 12 December, 3:38 p.m. – 6:10 p.m., WHT, Conversation 821-1b.

<sup>95</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 331, 358-359; Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 136-139.

Paris agreement. Before Agnew could depart, however, Thieu promised the National Assembly that he would never sign an agreement that did not require a total PAVN withdrawal from the South.<sup>96</sup> Kissinger could no longer contain his frustration, condemning Thieu on December 17 as an “insane son of a bitch,” a phrase that soon became Kissinger’s preferred label for Thieu.<sup>97</sup> He used the phrase repeatedly in a conversation with Haldeman on December 20, describing Thieu as an “unmitigated, selfish, psychopathic son-of-a-bitch.”<sup>98</sup>

A journalist from the *Washington Post* decried Linebacker II as “the most savage and senseless act of war ever visited... by one sovereign people over another.” While the American public was outraged over the Christmas Bombings, however, Hanoi felt compelled to return to the peace table in January. The bombings had little impact on Thieu, though, who snubbed American entreaties when Haig visited Saigon at the end of December.<sup>99</sup> Haig brought another letter, this time personally dictated by Nixon. The US president demanded a final decision from Thieu on the accords. If Washington and Saigon could not come together on this matter, Nixon would sign a separate peace. He had not dispatched Haig for further negotiations with Saigon, but simply to make it clear that the US-South Vietnamese alliance was at stake.<sup>100</sup> When Kissinger read Thieu’s

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<sup>96</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 215; Porter, *A Peace Denied*, 158-162; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 443-444.

<sup>97</sup> Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 17 December 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 716-722 (Document 187).

<sup>98</sup> Conversation Among President Nixon, the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), and the Assistant to the President (Haldeman), 20 December 1972, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 775-792 (Document 209).

<sup>99</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 315-317; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 446.

<sup>100</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 140.

response to Nixon, he suggested that it was time to sign a separate agreement with North Vietnam.<sup>101</sup>

On December 18, as the bombs began to fall, the White House informed Hanoi that they could settle the war on the terms of the November agreement, so long as the phrase “administrative structure” was deleted from the description of the NCNRC and the final documents were signed in such a way that Thieu did not have to explicitly recognize the PRG as a government in South Vietnam. The White House, however, did in fact recognize the PRG simply by signing documentation that named the insurgent organization. The new talks began on 8 January 1973, and were finalized on January 13.<sup>102</sup>

Kissinger tried to reassure Ambassador Phuong of the American commitment to South Vietnam, while warning him that the Thieu regime had “managed to enrage the President almost beyond belief.” The national security adviser promised, however, that the communists in Hanoi had not duped him. “We are under no illusions. They are a bunch of SOBs. They are the worst I have ever met. It is a pleasure to bomb them.”<sup>103</sup> On January 5, Nixon sent Thieu a letter along the same lines as his previous messages. Thieu continued to hold out, though Linebacker II seemed to prove that Nixon was still willing to fight for South Vietnamese sovereignty. Nixon sent two more letters, but Thieu was in no mood to compromise.<sup>104</sup> The US president’s mood turned dark, as he vowed to seek vengeance against his stubborn ally. “It’s going to be, Henry, totally cruel, believe me.

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<sup>101</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 446.

<sup>102</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 366-367.

<sup>103</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 3 January 1973, *FRUS*, October 1972-January 1973, Vol. IX: 882-892 (Document 243).

<sup>104</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 143-151.

Brutality is nothing. You've never seen it if this son-of-a-bitch doesn't go along, believe me."<sup>105</sup>

When Bunker called on January 19, Thieu was celebrating his daughter's wedding. Nha refused to let the ambassador speak to the president, and Thieu later took offense at the intrusion. Later that evening, though, Thieu told Nha that Nixon was a "man of honor," and that Saigon would need to sign the accords.<sup>106</sup> The South Vietnamese president nonetheless held out a little longer, however, hoping to eliminate an amendment to the draft agreement that prevented South Vietnamese police from carrying weapons heavier than pistols. Nixon and Kissinger believed Thieu's concerns were valid, since pistols could be concealed and were virtually useless for riot control. The president was nonetheless exhausted with Thieu's recalcitrance. After recommending that the White House issue another threat to cut off aid, Nixon quipped about a more direct solution to Thieu's obstinacy. "I don't know whether the threat [to cut off aid] goes too far or not, but I'd do any damn thing, that is, or to cut off his head if necessary."<sup>107</sup>

Finally, on January 21, Thieu informed Bunker that he would submit to American demands and sign the Paris Peace Accords. Nixon responded with a letter the next day, praising Thieu for "the tenacity and courage with which you are defending the interests of your people...."<sup>108</sup> On 27 January 1973, all four parties signed the Paris Agreement on

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<sup>105</sup> Conversation with Nixon, 7:05 PM, 16 January 1973, Box 17, Folder 10, HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM.

<sup>106</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 151-152.

<sup>107</sup> The transcript of this conversation is available at the Nixon Presidential Library. See Conversation with Nixon, 9:35 AM, 20 January 1973, Box 18, Folder 1, HAK Telecons, Chron, RNLM. This transcript excludes the quoted threat, however. The full discussion is available in Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, White House Telephone, 20 January 1973, 9:32 a.m. – 9:59 a.m., WHT, Conversation 36-21.

<sup>108</sup> Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 152-155.



Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson died a few hours before the ceremony, unable to witness the final conclusion of the war that exacted such a heavy toll on him.<sup>109</sup>

The final agreement had been forced upon Thieu against his will. Several PAVN units remained in South Vietnam, where they posed a major security threat. The demilitarized zone—described in the end as a “Provisional Military Demarcation Line,” rather than a border—was theoretically permeable only by civilians. In reality, Hanoi’s troops very frequently crossed the border. The NCNRC was no longer described as an “administrative structure,” but it retained its original functions. Under a ceasefire-in-place, all belligerent forces were required to remain where they stood while Saigon and the PRG negotiated control over specific territories in the South. This provision left South Vietnam vulnerable to enemy attacks, as Thieu had always feared.<sup>110</sup>

There was a more fundamental flaw with the agreement, though: it failed to resolve the central question of the war. The political future of South Vietnam was unresolved, even though US forces had retreated. Historian George C. Herring describes the mechanisms to sort out those details as “inherently unworkable.”<sup>111</sup> Larry Berman calls the Paris Peace Accords a “Jabberwocky Agreement,” borrowing a term from Lewis Carroll’s nonsensical poem in *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*.<sup>112</sup> Pierre Asselin views the agreement as a cynical arrangement designed to allow Washington and Hanoi to achieve their goals, rather than produce a lasting peace. The

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<sup>109</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 341, 366-368; Porter, *A Peace Denied*, 168; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 236.

<sup>110</sup> Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 367; Porter, *A Peace Denied*, 166-173. The text of the final agreement and various protocols is available in Porter, *A Peace Denied*, 319-349.

<sup>111</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 318-319.

<sup>112</sup> Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 241.

White House could bring its soldiers home, and the North Vietnamese saw its most powerful enemy leave the theatre of war.<sup>113</sup>

If Nixon and Kissinger had not pursued a decent interval strategy from late 1970 onward, the Paris Peace Accords virtually guaranteed that result. North Vietnamese soldiers still posed a threat to Saigon, which was both symbolically and substantively compromised by political provisions such as the NCNRC. Perhaps Nixon intended to follow through on his promises to bomb North Vietnam if the communists violated the agreements. Congress was not likely to grant him that power, though, even before the Watergate scandal made retaliation impossible.<sup>114</sup> Equally plausible, however, is that Nixon had not actually made a final decision on “postwar” bombing. If he did not have a plan for Vietnam while American troops were in the field, it is difficult to see how he could have a fixed strategy for the period after January 1973.<sup>115</sup> Nixon was an opportunist, a devotee of realpolitik. He had considered pursuing a decent interval strategy for some time, and could always change his mind about retaliatory bombings according to his perceptions of American national interests.

## **BEFORE THE FALL**

For most of 1972, the Nixon administration tried to support Nguyen Van Thieu’s government in Saigon. Despite Saigon’s lackluster performance during the Spring Offensive and the public outcry over Thieu’s intensifying authoritarianism, the White

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<sup>113</sup> Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, xi-xii.

<sup>114</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 319; Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 9, 259-260. Berman argues that Nixon intended to follow through on these promises for retaliation, but the fallout from the Watergate scandal changed his mind.

<sup>115</sup> Nixon adhered to certain strategic principles, but did not have a fixed plan to fight the war when he took office in 1969. See Chapter 2 for details.

House maintained that he was the most capable leader in South Vietnam. Even when US officials harbored significant doubts about Thieu's performance, Kissinger stymied criticism from Embassy Saigon and the US military. The White House, not wanting to demoralize Thieu and destabilize South Vietnam, needed the dictator to make the transition from war to peace.

While Thieu continued to garner some goodwill from the White House, he was unable to convince Nixon to apply further military pressure on Hanoi in order to achieve a better peace settlement. Thieu escaped some of the blame for the stalemated war, but the US president believed he lacked the kind of manly aggressiveness that wartime leaders needed. When Le Duc Tho offered Kissinger a realistic peace proposal, therefore, the negotiations accelerated. Nixon did not base his decision to pursue a negotiated settlement solely on his evaluations of Thieu, but nor did the South Vietnamese president effectively counter his allies' wariness of sustaining combat.

When Thieu and his advisers resisted signing the Paris Peace Accords, Nixon and Kissinger exploded in frustration, as did many other American officials who denigrated Thieu's behavior in blatantly racist terms. Where previously the White House held Thieu aloft as a South Vietnamese paragon, now it lamented his obstinacy as manifestation of racial weakness. In previous years, US officials had described Thieu's political opponents as greedy, fractious, and selfish. Now, they applied the same terms to Thieu, hoping to make sense of his sudden obstructionism. Ultimately, Saigon lost its struggle with Washington. The Republic of Vietnam depended on American foreign aid for survival, and could not risk a total break with the White House. After a ferocious diplomatic battle,

Thieu reluctantly signed the Paris agreement in January 1973. He could only hope Nixon would fulfill his promise to respond with force if hostilities continued.

## CONCLUSION

The Paris Peace Accords allowed Nixon to withdraw the last US soldiers from Vietnam, but the war was far from over. All sides violated the ceasefire, and further efforts to restore order through negotiations in Paris failed. Whatever his intentions before the peace treaty was signed, it became impossible for Nixon to maintain his support for Thieu after January 1973. When the two leaders met in San Clemente, California, in April, Nixon pledged to assist Saigon in the event of major North Vietnamese ceasefire violations. Thieu spent considerable time discussing such violations, but failed to convince Nixon to redeploy troops to Southeast Asia. The US Congress cut aid appropriations for Saigon, and polls revealed that the vast majority of Americans were unwilling to sacrifice more blood to prop up South Vietnam. Nixon's personal authority also diminished as the Watergate scandal unfolded. Seeking to undermine the Democrats in the 1972 presidential election, some of Nixon's close associates organized a break-in of the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate apartment complex. They were arrested before they could plant surveillance equipment, but the White House successfully covered up the story until after the election.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is difficult to describe with precision the Nixon-Thieu relationship after 1973 because so many records remain classified, the alliance appears to have

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<sup>1</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 323-331; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 462-489; Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, 93, 250-262; Memorandum for the President's Files by the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 2 April 1973, *FRUS*, January 1973 – July 1975, Vol. X: 179-182 (Document 38); Memorandum for the President's Files by the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 3 April 1973, *FRUS*, January 1973 – July 1975, Vol. X: 182-184 (Document 39).

continued its downward trajectory. The tensions that emerged when Thieu refused to sign the Accords persisted, particularly when he refused to sign a new communiqué pledging all combatants to a renewed ceasefire. Kissinger was less patient with Saigon than he had been before late 1972, and threatened to cut off foreign aid unless Thieu agreed to the ceasefire.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the tensions between Saigon and Washington eased, however, after the Accords were signed. Graham Martin, who replaced Ellsworth Bunker as the US ambassador in July 1973, was as determined as his predecessor not to judge the Thieu regime too harshly. Martin warned US officials in Saigon and Washington “not to overindulge in ‘proctological examinations’ of the South Vietnamese body politic and to accept the society ‘warts and all.’” In comparing corruption in present-day Saigon to corruption in Boston during the first decades of the century, Martin attempted to break through the prevailing prejudices in Washington about the nature of Thieu’s regime.<sup>3</sup> Much like Bunker, Martin admired Thieu and sought to protect him.<sup>4</sup>

The easing of tensions lasted until South Vietnam’s final days. When North Vietnamese soldiers closed in on Saigon in 1975, Thieu ordered ARVN to retreat. The withdrawal quickly devolved into a rout, much to the White House’s chagrin.<sup>5</sup> Kissinger rebuffed Director of Central Intelligence William Colby’s suggestion to replace Thieu

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<sup>2</sup> Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 463-473, 483-484, 488-489.

<sup>3</sup> Snapp, *Decent Interval*, 76-77.

<sup>4</sup> Snapp, *Decent Interval*, 95-96; Memorandum of Conversation, 15 February 1975, *FRUS*, January 1973 – July 1975, Vol. X: 629-632 (Document 172); Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 20 March 1975, *FRUS*, January 1973 – July 1975, Vol. X: 684-686 (Document 190).

<sup>5</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 332-336.

with either South Vietnamese Chief of Staff Cao Van Vien or Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem. “Thieu has shown himself,” Kissinger declared, to be “far and away the most capable of all the Vietnamese leaders I have known since 1965.”<sup>6</sup> The secretary of state excused Thieu’s blunder in ordering the withdrawal of ARVN from the highlands on the grounds that he had understandably panicked when American aid was not forthcoming.<sup>7</sup> Kissinger also dismissed rumors that Thieu’s nemesis, Nguyen Cao Ky, might return to seize power. “Ky is a boy scout, a flamboyant pop-off,” he told Colby.<sup>8</sup>

There were limits to these minor improvements in the US-South Vietnamese alliance. Nixon did not redeploy US soldiers to Vietnam or order a new bombing campaign, even though the ceasefire flopped. Kissinger had recommended launching a new bombing campaign shortly after signing the Accords, but Nixon knew that he lacked popular support for another military intervention. As the Watergate scandal unfolded, the president’s approval rating plummeted. Even if he had not been distracted by the scandal, he simply did not have the political capital to protect South Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

Nixon resigned in August 1974 to avoid impeachment over the Watergate scandal. His replacement, Gerald Ford, gave half-hearted support to South Vietnam. In 1974, he requested \$1 billion in aid for South Vietnam. Congress consented to a \$722 million appropriation in 1974, though half of that money was allocated to shipping expenses, and

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<sup>6</sup> Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, 28 March 1975, *FRUS*, January 1973 – July 1975, Vol. X: 706-710 (Document 196).

<sup>7</sup> Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s Staff Meeting, 3 February 1969, “Secretary’s Staff Meeting, March 31, 1975,” Box 6, Lot 78D443, RG 59, NARA.

<sup>8</sup> Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, 28 March 1975, *FRUS*, January 1973 – July 1975, Vol. X: 706-710 (Document 196).

<sup>9</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 327-329; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 469.

the legislators rejected all later appeals. The president also refused to meet with Thieu, and refused the latter's plea for air support during Hanoi's final offensive in 1975.<sup>10</sup>

Nguyen Van Thieu resigned on 21 April 1975. He fled with fifteen tons of luggage, mostly gold, and lived out his final days first in London, and then in an affluent Boston neighborhood. Thieu left the Republic of Vietnam in the hands of Tran Van Huong, who quickly retired as well. General Big Minh was left to negotiate Saigon's surrender, as North Vietnamese tanks crashed through the Palace gates on April 30. The few remaining Americans in South Vietnam escaped in a dramatic helicopter evacuation. The American war in Vietnam was over, and neither Nixon nor Thieu survived in office, not even for a decent interval.<sup>11</sup>

The Nixon administration had supported Thieu for four years, despite his terrible performance record. He was slow to act when major challenges arose, and he preferred to brutally suppress political opponents rather than compromise with them. He promoted military officers based on their loyalty instead of competence, with disastrous consequences for the 1971 invasion of Laos. Thieu's bureaucracy was corrupt, and he was one of the culprits. He successfully implemented US-inspired policies, such as

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<sup>10</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 331; John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 53, 57, 132-139; Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 603, 610-612; Chennault, *The Education of Anna*, 205-206. Greene argues that Ford purposefully sabotaged his 1975 aid requests so Congress, not the White House, would take the blame for the imminent fall of South Vietnam.

<sup>11</sup> Herring, *America's Longest War*, 336-337; Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 4, 187; Backchannel Message From the Deputy Chief of Mission in Vietnam (Lehmann) to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), 26 March 1975, *FRUS*, January 1973 – July 1975, Vol. X: 697-699 (Document 193); Philip Bennett, "Thieu looks back, ahead from Newton exile, ex-Vietnam leader warns on regime," *Boston Globe*, 25 November 1992.



austerity and land reforms, but alienated the National Assembly in the process. Thieu had not impressed Lyndon Johnson, but the Nixon administration embraced him until the end of 1972.

Nixon's support for Thieu was partially based on his belief that he owed the South Vietnamese president for the Republican Party's electoral victory in 1968. Thieu's obstruction of Johnson's peace initiative hampered Vice President Hubert Humphrey's campaign, and helped Nixon take the White House. The Nixon campaign had encouraged Thieu to hold out against the White House through an envoy, Anna Chennault. While there is no definitive evidence linking Nixon personally to this plot, it is reasonable to believe that he was involved. Saigon had its own reasons for blocking the negotiations, however, so it is doubtful that Chennault significantly influenced Thieu's decision. Still, since Johnson's peace initiative failed, Nixon felt indebted to Thieu from the moment he entered the Oval Office, and he ordered his advisers not to criticize him publicly or privately.

Nixon was also a self-styled realist, who sought a strongman in Saigon to support the White House's efforts in reducing the burdens of empire. Thieu had the support of the South Vietnamese military brass, and had managed to stay in office longer than any leader since Ngo Dinh Diem. He appeared compatible with Nixon's long-term strategic goals, and his friendly approach to Washington helped solidify that relationship.

Racism, however, facilitated the Nixon administration's generous appraisals and treatment of Thieu. Both Johnson and Nixon believed the Vietnamese were inferior to Americans, as did their advisers and ambassadors in Saigon. With great regularity, US

officials complained that the Vietnamese were fractious, selfish, corrupt, and incompetent. Whereas the Johnson administration believed that Thieu fit that pattern perfectly, the Nixon White House considered him a South Vietnamese superman until the final stages of the American intervention. Under the guidance of Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, Thieu promoted the policies that mattered most to Nixon. Thieu cooperated with Vietnamization, the gradual replacement of US soldiers with Vietnamese troops, and participated in large-scale military campaigns in Cambodia and Laos. He also reinvigorated the pacification campaign, until Washington relegated it to a lower priority. Thieu took steps to salvage the sinking South Vietnamese economy, and at least tried to appear as though he was combating corruption and drug trafficking. Until late 1972, he also seemed to take a reasonable stand on peace negotiations, even though Nixon and Kissinger were not always honest with him about what they sought in a final agreement. As a result, Thieu developed a reputation in the White House for excellent leadership.

When an opportunity arose to replace Thieu, during the 1971 South Vietnamese presidential election, the Nixon administration did not even consider endorsing a different candidate. Big Minh had a popular following, but he was too soft on communism for American tastes. Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky was too unreliable, as he appeared hawkish one moment and then preached peace the next. The White House was content to see Thieu surpass both opponents in the election, even if the one-man contest proved embarrassing because of blatant electioneering. Other South Vietnamese officials seemingly demonstrated strong leadership skills. Prime Minister Tran Van Huong was a veteran statesman in 1969, but his lethargy and poor relations with the National Assembly

made him an inappropriate candidate for the presidency. Even when South Vietnam approached collapse, Kissinger found the prospects of replacing Thieu with Vien or Khiem repugnant. The White House believed that Thieu was exceptional; there was simply nobody that could replace him.

At the same time, Thieu was still Vietnamese. If US officials sometimes believed he was superior to his countrymen, they also doubted that he could fully escape his basic Asian nature. The White House and Embassy Saigon explained Thieu's heavy-handed repression, apparent obsession with his personal prestige, and authoritarianism as manifestations of Vietnamese racial inferiority. Since he was not an American, US officials reasoned, he could not be judged by American standards. Thieu's policy achievements bolstered his reputation in the White House, therefore, and the Nixon administration's racism protected him from criticism.

From 1969 to late 1972, the Nixon-Thieu relationship remained strong. Even when Nixon began to doubt that the war was winnable, Thieu remained crucial to his plans. If South Vietnam was going to survive, the White House needed a strongman in Saigon to guide the country through wartime instabilities. If Nixon decided to pursue a decent interval, instead, he needed Thieu to survive long enough to protect American prestige. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger believed that anyone else could fulfill this task better than Thieu. Historical precedence seemed to justify this conclusion, because every other national leader who had emerged since Ngo Dinh Diem had quickly fallen from power.

Only when South Vietnamese national interests clashed directly with American priorities did the alliance with Thieu shatter. When this happened, Thieu's greatest supporters in the White House rebuked their client in vicious, brutal language. They lamented Thieu's "insane," "psychotic" decision to go "off the reservation" by blocking the peace negotiations. The White House dismissed South Vietnamese concerns about the Accords, blaming Thieu's obstructionism on his "Mandarin" roots. Even Ambassador Bunker, one of Thieu's staunchest American friends, expressed frustration with Saigon's refusal to sign the Paris Peace Accords. Although the Nixon administration achieved its goals in January 1973 by forcing Thieu to sign the Accords, its commitment to South Vietnam began to decline.

Although racism alone does not explain the Nixon administration's support for Thieu, prejudices played an important role. While traditional national and strategic interests might explain why the White House sought a strongman, bigotry changed the nuances of that relationship. This dissertation, therefore adds to the growing literature on culture and ideology in US foreign relations by demonstrating how individual officials skew policymaking processes through unfounded assumptions, personal beliefs, and character flaws.

Nobody in the White House had been angrier with Thieu during the final peace negotiations than Nixon and Kissinger. When discussing the Vietnam War in their memoirs, however, they were surprisingly generous in their descriptions of Thieu. They could not easily rebuke Thieu without admitting that supporting him had been a mistake. It was also necessary to explain why they had supported a peace settlement that had

proven entirely ineffective. While Nixon and Kissinger perhaps wanted to protect their legacies, their memoirs include genuine notes of regret about their strongman's fate. According to Nixon, the South Vietnamese had been far better off under Thieu's dictatorship than communist dominance. Thieu had been an effective leader, Nixon argued, who stabilized South Vietnam by fervently supporting pacification and land reform. The former US president excused Thieu's tolerance of cronyism in ARVN's ranks, even though it undermined combat efficacy. South Vietnamese factionalism was a constant source of instability, so Thieu needed to maintain military's support. While Saigon's obstructionism regarding the Paris Peace Accords alienated American legislators, Nixon also expressed sympathy for Thieu's anxieties about the agreement. In the end, Nixon placed more blame on the American news media, antiwar movement, and Congress than on Thieu for the loss in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

Kissinger offered a more nuanced view of South Vietnam's former president. While condemning Thieu's "ruthless egocentricity," Kissinger admired the tenacity with which Saigon's strongman resisted the enemy troop presence and any clause in the Peace Accords that might cast aspersions on him as an American puppet.<sup>13</sup> Although Kissinger never abandoned his contempt for the Vietnamese and still criticized Washington's client for blocking the Accords, he sympathized with the challenges that Thieu had faced. Since

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 15, 132-133, 136, 151-156; Richard Nixon, *1999: Victory Without War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 122; Richard Nixon, *The Real War* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), 118-119, 239; Richard Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 344; Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 348-349, 689-697, 719-737, 749-751.

<sup>13</sup> Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1440-1441.

“peace involving American withdrawal was a traumatic event for the South Vietnamese,” Kissinger argued, Thieu needed to carefully prepare his people for an end to the war while maintaining his nationalist credentials. Thieu’s near heroic opposition to the Paris Peace Accords had been designed to “steel [the South Vietnamese] to their psychological independence.” While ridiculing Thieu’s tactics as “obnoxiously Vietnamese,” Kissinger nonetheless expressed admiration for the strength with which Thieu had defended South Vietnam’s national interests.<sup>14</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger’s reminiscences better reflect their opinions of Thieu between 1969 and 1972 than their diatribes that preceded the final peace treaty. Thieu was a flawed character, but they also considered him a strong leader and fierce nationalist. He had stabilized a chaotic nation, Nixon and Kissinger argued, and even his most detestable behavior was understandable in hindsight. As devotees to realpolitik, Nixon and Kissinger tolerated Saigon’s dictatorship. The White House’s decision to support Thieu over any other potential clients, however, was strongly influenced by racial prejudices. Senior US officials, convinced that most South Vietnamese political and military leaders were completely unqualified for the presidency, latched onto a man who appeared to transcend his innate weaknesses. As the United States fought its longest war

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<sup>14</sup> Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1467. Kissinger maintained this rosy view of Thieu in his other works. See: Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), 534; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), 309-315. Thieu led a very quiet life after leaving Saigon, rarely granting interviews or appearing in public. He sustained his resentment of the Nixon administration over the Paris Peace Accords, but left no strong record of how his feelings might have changed during his remaining years. See: David Lamb, “Nguyen Van Thieu, 78; S. Vietnam’s President,” 1 October 2001; Philip Bennett, “Thieu looks back, ahead from Newton exile, ex-Vietnam leader warns on regime,” *Boston Globe*, 25 November 1992; and “Ghosts of Vietnam,” *Boston Globe*, 29 November 1992.

to date, therefore, the Nixon administration decided to see it through with Nguyen Van Thieu.

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