

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

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Yet Another Obstacle for South Vietnam's President Thieu

DESPITE President Nguyen Van Thieu's screams of anguish about Hanoi's front-line troops staying in South Vietnam after a ceasefire, his far more dangerous peace problem is not foreign troops but whether he can control the sudden opening up of the political system.

Thieu is being strongly advised to stop worrying about Hanoi's military strength in South Vietnam (centered in the North). U.S. experts here and in Saigon are convinced that, once a settlement is reached, the pledge of basic political freedoms to anti-Thieu nationalists and Communist elements loyal to Hanoi will confront Thieu and his own savvy as a politician with his most serious challenge.

As of today, this may seem a moot question for Thieu, with North Vietnam again under fierce American bombing and any settlement apparently far in the future.

Nevertheless, Thieu is being privately but strongly advised to prepare far in advance for a post-settlement political career which for the first time will pit him publicly and openly against hardnosed opponents. The advice boils down to these essentials:

1. Thieu, now occupying the far right in Vietnamese politics, must move sharply toward the center.
2. To show his willingness to shift some of his power from the inner clique of generals and province chiefs who now surround him to a more broadly based constituency, Thieu should be prepared to fire his more notoriously corrupt political allies.
3. Even if the final peace agreement fails to carry a proviso compelling him

to release some 40,000 or so political prisoners (including many Communist agents), Thieu must open the prison gates to thousands of them. To refuse, highly placed American experts believe, would be to hand the Communists a glittering issue that could undermine his popularity and destroy him.

That popularity today is at its highest point. Even by conservative estimates, a genuinely free election in South Vietnam would overwhelmingly reelect Thieu.

But the foundation of his popularity

has been his role as champion of South Vietnamese nationalism, effectively battling both Communists in Hanoi and Americans in Washington.

Once a settlement is reached, that foundation could crumble. Thieu will become an incumbent president with no hot war to use as a rallying point either for his army or his people, beset with huge economic problems and for the first time stripped of active help from Washington. Instead of umbrella protection against every adversary, Washington will supply only economic aid, a few technicians and limited military aid.



Henry . . . About These Doves of Yours . . .

But the element of time is now working for Thieu. With a settlement apparently weeks or months in the future, he can begin to plan a political style and strategy to fit the open politics of a new era, in which Communist and pro-Communist politicians, underground for 20 years, will suddenly find equal access to the press, the speaker's platform and political organization.

The element of time is crucial. Thus, when Henry Kissinger arrived in Saigon last Oct. 19 with the peace formula he had just worked out with Le Duc Tho in Paris, neither Thieu nor U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker had the faintest idea what he was bringing with him.

Thieu was stunned when Kissinger opened up his surprise package, not so much by its content, but because—according to the Washington-Hanoi plan—it would take effect within a few weeks.

In retrospect, some highly-placed American officials believe that Thieu's screams of anguish had two purposes: First, and least important, his hope of forcing changes in the package; second, and far more important, to give him time to prepare for the ceasefire.

One such official told us: "Thieu's nightmare was a sudden ceasefire, mass defections from his army as the boys ran home to plow their fields and utter disorganization inside his government."

The deadlock in the peace talks—which Thieu powerfully helped bring about—has given him more time. His problem now is to use it wisely in preparation for the radically transformed politics that lies ahead.

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