

Thieu Said to Have Backed Peace Bid Before Election

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 28 — President Nguyen Van Thieu agreed to the allies' new peace proposals, including his offer to resign, even before his re-election last Oct. 3, according to authoritative American sources.

Mr. Thieu's agreement, the sources say, was obtained by American officials, including an aide from the White House, at the height of a period of political protest and unrest in Vietnam last September. It was given, the sources say, in the same spirit of strength and self-confidence in which Mr. Thieu publicly announced his willingness to resign, in a speech broadcast Wednesday morning shortly after President Nixon's disclosure of the peace plan.

Informed Vietnamese observers say that in part the confidence came from President Thieu's often-expressed conviction that the war would end not by negotiations but on the battlefield and that the Communists would probably reject the newest proposals, as they have all others.

Rejections Are Mixed

Among political personalities in Saigon the reaction to President Nixon's disclosures has been mixed. But there does not seem to be any feeling that, by agreeing to the secret plan submitted in Paris by the Americans last Oct. 11, Mr. Thieu weakened his position or that of his embattled Government. The entire proposal was reportedly kept completely secret until this week.

According to one American observer, "except for the Ambassador, all this was completely beyond anyone's knowledge at the American Embassy until President Nixon and Mr. Thieu made their speeches Wednesday morning." Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker has refused to accede to requests by reporters for background interviews on the latest disclosures.

At a news conference in Washington on Wednesday the key figure in the secret negotiations, President Nixon's national security aide, Henry A. Kissinger, said that the substance of the peace plan disclosed this week was presented to the North Vietnamese delegation to the Paris peace talks on Oct. 11.

Ambassador Bunker met with President Thieu in Saigon on that day, but only for 20 minutes. American sources here doubt that at so short a meeting a proposal for Mr. Thieu to offer to resign before an internationally supervised election could have been broached and agreed upon.

The Americans point out, however, that more than two weeks earlier, Mr. Kissinger's deputy, Brig. Gen. Alexander

M. Haig Jr. flew to Saigon and on Sept. 23, in Ambassador Bunker's company, conferred for an hour and 45 minutes with President Thieu.

It was probably then, the sources speculated, that the new elements of the proposal—specifically including the offer by President Thieu to resign a month before new elections in which the South Vietnamese Communists could participate—were discussed in detail and, in principle at least, agreed upon.

Ambassador Bunker had also met with Mr. Thieu two days earlier, eight days after the last secret meeting between Mr. Kissinger and the North Vietnamese in Paris.

Between Sept. 23 and Oct. 11 Mr. Bunker did not meet with Mr. Thieu at all, according to a spokesman for the American Embassy.

President Nixon, in his speech Tuesday night, said that he had consulted with President Thieu, "who concurred fully" before offering the new secret plan on Oct. 11.

Speech Followed Nixon's

President Thieu was scheduled to go on the air at the same time as President Nixon but did not until about 10 minutes after the Nixon speech, which was broadcast live here on the American Forces Radio. Mr. Thieu said that he made the offer "to show our utmost goodwill in restoring peace to the nation and contributing in the restoration of peace of this entire region."

An American source said: "I think this will strengthen Thieu's Government. It will show that he thinks he's in control and that he knew the people would not be demoralized if he made an offer like this."

According to Americans who have communicated with Mr. Thieu and his principal advisers since Wednesday, they are elated and "pleased with themselves."

Efforts by reporters to verify this have been frustrated by the inaccessibility of the presidential press secretary, Hoang Duc Nha, one of Mr. Thieu's closest advisers and a writer of his speech.

Reaction to the proposals from both opposition and pro-Government politicians in Saigon appears to give Mr. Thieu little to worry about. At worst the announcement and resignation offer provoked cynicism—that because the Communists had, as President Nixon said, ignored the new plan since Oct. 11 and then denounced it after it was made public this week, Mr. Thieu must have been sure he was never running any real risk.

One presidential aide told a Vietnamese reporter in private, "We just wanted to show our

goodwill—after all, who could succeed Mr. Thieu?"

The process of getting Mr. Thieu to agree to make his offer public apparently took longer than the process of getting him to agree to make it in secret to the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris. Mr. Bunker met with him seven times this month, all but once between Jan. 10 and Jan. 25, the day before the speech.

On Jan. 26 the Ambassador let the rest of his mission in on the secret. "He gathered his counselors in his office Wednesday morning and they all listened to President Nixon's speech on the radio," an assistant said.

An American who worked on the problem said: "Within the Vietnamese Government there were no problems in making this decision that I've heard of, and I doubt there were any, in fact. If Gen. Duong Van Minh had been elected last October and then done this, then maybe there'd be some concern, but Thieu could do it easily."

The office of General Minh, who was regarded as the leading opposition candidate against President Thieu until he refused to run because of reports of election rigging, issued a statement today saying: "Gen. Duong Van Minh does not want to say anything that would only further weaken the spirit of the people and army. This is a time for work, not a time for unuseful comment."

President Thieu is not believed to regard his proposals as a serious contradiction to his campaign platform, the so-called "four no's"—no concession of land to the Communists, no coalition with the Communists, no "Communist-style neutralism" and no freedom for the Communists to operate openly in South Vietnam. He has held these positions for the two years since his last public offer July 11, 1969, to allow elections with Communist participation.