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Thieu, Minh and Peace

The stalemate in the Paris talks, President Thieu's cocktail banter about stepping down and a call for peace and "national reconciliation" by his leading rival, General "Big" Minh, are stirring new interest in South Vietnam's impending presidential campaign. There is speculation in Paris and Saigon that Mr. Thieu's withdrawal or his defeat in the election might open the way to negotiation for a political settlement between the Communists and a new Saigon Government.

In Paris, informal contacts between American and North Vietnamese delegates during lunch breaks at the weekly plenary meetings suggest that the chief immediate obstacle to substantive private negotiations is Communist refusal to deal with the Thieu Government. Other procedural issues appear now to be within negotiating range.

The United States has indicated its willingness to negotiate on the two "fundamental" issues the Communists have said must be settled before there can be a cease-fire. Washington is prepared to discuss complete American withdrawal by a fixed date as well as Communist proposals for an interim coalition government, pending elections.

But Ambassador Bruce has made it clear to the Communists that he will not negotiate on South Vietnam's political future without the participation of the Saigon Government. Hanoi and the Vietcong refuse to meet privately with representatives of President Thieu, although they have met semipublicly with them at 91 plenary sessions.

In these circumstances, the theory has sprung up that the Communists are delaying negotiations until next year's elections are over. Despite denials from the American Embassy, the Saigon rumor mill hints that Washington may withdraw support from President Thieu to help General Minh get elected.

Much of this speculation, however, appears to be based on misconceptions. American diplomats believe President Thieu has every intention of running for a second term. His control of the electoral apparatus makes his defeat by any rival, including General Minh, extremely unlikely. There is some doubt, in any event, that General Minh has the stomach for a knock-down-drag-out electoral battle.

Furthermore, even if General Minh could be elected, there is no assurance that the Communists would try to reach a settlement with him. Contrary to general belief, they have not said that they would negotiate with anybody except General Thieu, Vice President Ky and Premier Khiem. Their specification is that they would negotiate with a new Saigon administration—minus Thieu, Ky and Khiem—"really standing for peace, independence, neutrality and democracy."

The Communists, of course, recall the two years of political chaos in South Vietnam that followed the ouster and assassination of President Diem in 1963. So does the United States, which also remembers that General Minh, titular leader of that coup, was himself ousted a few months later by his military associates. Quite apart from any such considerations, the appropriate posture for the United States is to "Vietnamize" the election by keeping hands off.

If a political upset did occur, through elections or other developments, President Thieu's successor is more likely to be another member of the Saigon military leadership than any outsider. What is more, he would probably be less, not more, moderate than Thieu on the terms of a negotiated settlement.

The White House believes that Thieu is prepared, as part of a negotiated settlement, to accept Communist participation in the Saigon Government—and that he would have the political strength to impose this on his military associates. On that basis, the Communists have no good reason to delay negotiations further.

The standstill cease-fire and other proposals made by President Nixon offer the Vietcong, in effect, regional dominance in their areas of traditional influence, minority participation in the Saigon Government and complete American troop withdrawal in twelve months. No one, of course, expects the Communists to discard their aim of ultimate majority control of the Saigon Government. The choice they now face is whether to continue to pursue that aim through military means or to transfer the struggle to the political field by negotiating a compromise settlement.