

Big Minh Hears Question From Many: Will He Run?

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By ALVIN SHUSTER
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Nov. 10 — Automobile traffic near the villa on Hongthaptu Street has picked up lately. Ambassadors, politicians, retired generals and various religious figures have been arriving with increasing regularity these days to chat with Gen. Duong Van Minh, the man most likely to challenge President Nguyen Van Thieu in the elections next year.

The 53-year-old retired general, known as Big Minh, talks to them all from a white plastic chair in his large living room, offers them a cup of tea and a pleasant smile, and tries to explain why he thinks "national reconciliation and solidarity" would lead to peace.

Offers No Blueprint

One of the most popular figures in the country, General Minh has indicated, but has not said flatly, that he will run. And so the guests come, trying to find out for sure whether he will run and to seek some elaboration on where he stands on the issues of the day.

The guests may not discover any blueprints for solving the nation's problems, but they do come away convinced that he will make the race next year in the interests of saving and unifying the country.

They tell of his references to the need for the South Viet-

namese to have confidence in their Government, the perilous state of the economy, and to internal divisions so dangerous to survival.

In explaining his call for national reconciliation, General Minh has told some visitors that the Communists would only negotiate seriously at Paris when South Vietnam could demonstrate internal solidarity. So long as South Vietnam appears divided and unhappy, he tells guests, the Communists maintain hope of eventual victory.

Chooses Words Carefully

The general, who usually greets his visitors in a short-sleeve sports shirt, chooses his words carefully. And for the time being, he has decided against public declarations going beyond his statement on Nov. 1, when he broke a year-long silence to call for peace and bemoan the present plight of the country.

The statement, issued by him as the leader of the group of generals who overthrew the Ngo Dinh Diem regime seven years ago, said the country was becoming more destitute, society more desperate, the life of the people more miserable, and the national sovereignty more infringed. He talked of a loss of faith in the nation's leaders.

"A revolution of political, economic and social conscious-

ness ought to receive a total support from and the active participation of the whole people," he declared in the statement, which many observers found vague.

Not Regarded as Shrewd

General Minh, who is not regarded as politically shrewd even by his admirers, usually asks his visitors for their reaction to his statement. And he has shown some interest in the American Embassy's view of his recent activities.

So far, the embassy has said nothing, determined to keep a public stance of detachment from the possible clash between General Minh and President Thieu. Embassy officials have not been among those who have been calling on General Minh.

The General became chief of state after the 1963 coup against President Diem. Within a few months, however, he was arrested and sent into exile.

He traveled to many parts of the world—he keeps an album of the pictures he took at the time—and finally settled in Bangkok. He tried to return home in 1967 to run against President Thieu, but was barred.

He was allowed to return to Saigon in October, 1968, and has lived quietly since then in his villa with his wife, daughter and three grandchildren. He plays tennis twice a week, grows orchids, works in his

photographic darkroom, watches American football on the American military television network, and says little for publication.