

# Ky's New Role on The Saigon Stage

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## Saigon

Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, after declining to run for higher office, has propelled himself back into South Vietnam's presidential politics with a splash.

He did so, very deliberately, by vividly reviving the spectre of a coup d'etat in an effort to put pressure of President Thieu to postpone the uncontested presidential election scheduled for October 3.

Ky's blunt threats are not expected to accomplish much, for his military resources are limited. But they have brought him back, perhaps for the last time, to the center stage he relishes, and have reinforced his reputation as an unpredictable, irrepressible enfant terrible.

The vice president's pledge to destory Thieu, by armed force if necessary, has also

added a new touch of theater to an election campaign apparently stripped of drama by the withdrawal of all opposition candidates.

For Saigon's helter-skelter press and the conspiratorial idlers in the downtown cafes, the prospect of Ky and his pilots flying strafing runs at the presidential palace has given this year's humdrum political equation a new and exciting unknown.

Theories abound to explain what Ky hopes to achieve by his talk of a coup, but none is fully satisfactory.

What is clear, however, is that Ky wanted to get his though talking message across to both Thieu and the Americans without having it publicly attributed to him — and that in seeking to do so he badly miscalculated.

The vice president's public utterances since he withdrew from the election campaign have been generally decorous. On Thursday he gave a mild interview to a Reuter

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correspondent, and Friday morning had an on-the-record breakfast with Vietnamese journalists in which he spoke in softish terms about a possible reconciliation with Thieu.

## INTERVIEW

Friday evening, however, he held a background session at his villa on Tan Son Nhut Air Base with ten foreign journalists, on the understanding that his remarks not be quoted directly and that they be attributed only to "a course close to the vice president."

But the identity of the source leaked out almost immediately. Although the participants in the background session generally observed the rules, in a few hours other agencies were quoting Ky directly and more or less accurately.

Yesterday morning, Ky's office issued a quasi-denial, to the effect that no one had been authorized to speak to the press as a "source close to the Vice President." Ky did not, however, deny the statements themselves.

Thieu has yet to respond to Ky's threats, which coming from another man would certainly have been considered grounds for arrest and persecution on charges on treason.

## THEORY

There was a theory among some American officials Saturday that Ky hoped to goad Thieu into seeking to arrest him — an action that would certainly result in an armed clash involving forces loyal to Ky, and could conceivably snowball into a chaotic situation that might ultimately cause the president to lose control of the country.

Generally, diplomats here believe Thieu will do nothing unless Ky takes some overt action against him. Ky, although he has been busy meeting with high-ranking South Vietnamese officers, is not believed to have any-

where near the support necessary to carry out a successful coup.

Thieu, however, has instilled some new anti-aircraft artillery positions on the grounds, presumably for protection in case some of Ky's pilots — the vice president still holds the rank of air marshal — should decide to launch a quixotic raid.

At his background session, Ky appeared serious and collected, despite the explosiveness of his remarks about his plans for Thieu.

## THREAT

He did not explicitly say how or when he expected to do it, but declared that "I am going to destroy him (Thieu) and all his clique — and all those of you (journalists) living around his palace must move."

He compared the present political situation to 1963, when President Ngo Dinh Diem was toppled by a coup and subsequently assassinated, in these terms: "It is like two powder kegs, one big and one small. The one in 1963 was small, but it detonated. Today we have a bigger one, but we have yet to find the fuse."

Asked if he thought Thieu would take action against him — arrest or exile — when word of his threats leaked out, Ky said it was "unthinkable."

In the view of South Vietnamese and American observers here, the vice president may be right on his last assumption, but only up to a point.

Ky apparently intends to keep on doing whatever he can to halt Thieu's progress towards a second four-year term. And because no one is sure exactly what he is capable of, he is getting a good deal more attention than he has received in some time.