

A Vow and a Plea By Saigon's Thieu

By Philip A. McCombs
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Saigon

With the Vietnam war still raging on the second anniversary of the Paris cease-fire agreement, South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu declares, "I won't give up! We won't give up! Not President Thieu! The South Vietnamese people won't give up."

In an interview with the Washington Post, Thieu said he wanted to appeal directly to the new American Congress to grant South Vietnam \$300 million in emergency military aid as "the minimum we need badly now." Without it, he warned, a "very disastrous situation" will develop.

"To the American people and the American Congress I would like to impress them that we need badly the support of the U.S. people," Thieu said. "We need badly the military aid to resist against Communist aggression and takeover of South Vietnam."

Thieu said, "I'm still confident that the U.S. will never abandon an ally in wartime." But later in the interview, he said with evident emotion, "and if the American people abandon them, what will the South Vietnamese people do? They will fight to the last cartridge they have on hand!"

Thieu came on as courageous and firm during the hour-long interview.

The president, speaking in English, appeared sure of himself as he diplomatically skirted touchy points — such as his relations with the Americans — or directly answered difficult questions.



PRESIDENT THIEU
"I won't give up"

Yet on balance, Thieu seem to hold out little hope for peace in South Vietnam, if only because of his own grim assessment of Communist intentions — an assessment that is shared by most other analysts here.

For his own part, Thieu said he wants to see free Democratic elections carried out under the terms of the Paris agreement and he is unconditionally ready to return to the negotiating table to bring this about. He suggested, however, that he is prepared to make no further concessions to the Communists other than

those provided for in the agreement itself.

The cease-fire agreement went into effect here two years ago. Since then 149,000 Vietnamese have died and 1.4 million have been made homeless by the war.

Thieu was asked about charges that he is as intransigent as the Communists and that the U.S. aid cutbacks have curbed him.

He responded with a short diplomatic history leading to the signing of the agreement, and suggested that he signed it even though not entirely happy with it because it offered "a basis for peace."

This shows, he said, that his government was not stubborn or demanding. Further, he said, his government advanced concrete schedules for bringing about elections under the terms of the agreement but these, he charged, were rejected by the Communists.

"What they want is to buy time to send more troops from North Vietnam, to rebuild airfields, to build highways, a pipeline, to have more storage for their artillery, rockets and (other) logistics from Russia and China," he said.

Thieu said the Communist armies have launched a "general offensive" that accounts for the current widespread fighting. Thieu used the phrase many times. Analysts differ on how "gener-

al" the offensive is. Most say it is limited, at least so far.

Asked if he felt betrayed by the Americans, Thieu said, "Not yet." Then he launched into his appeal to Congress. "I am very confident that the U.S., which has never lost any war, which

has never failed to help any people who would like to preserve their independence, (will support us)."

Asked what assurance he could give the American people that the war would eventually end and they wouldn't have to continue giving forever, he first said the American people must never believe that he is asking for "open-ended aid." Economically, he said that "substantial" aid would lead to economic takeoff so that economic aid could decline to the \$100 million level by 1980 or 1981.

Thieu was asked if he had decided to run in next October's presidential elections in South Vietnam, and who else might run.

"I have not yet made any decision," he said. "Because last year I predicted that this year we (would) have a very difficult economic situation, a general offensive of the Communists. Let us see what I can do on three points: to beat the Communist offensive, to deal with the economic situation, and to perform on my administrative reform. I will judge myself if I deserve to be a candidate again."

He said "many" others would run for president — "maybe some that you have known and maybe some new political leaders from the opposition." He declined to name names.

"How do you deal with opposition charges that you have limited political freedom?" he was asked.

"What do you think of that!" he exclaimed in response.

"Never, ah, you may never see so much freedom, so much democracy in a country in the midst of war and where the enemy is not too far from the capital.

Then Thieu said forcefully: "No! Nobody, not one single politician has been put in jail since ten years I have been in government. No one. I can tell you no one. No one!"