

My 'Exclusive' Interview

SAIGON — Foreign correspondents dream of getting exclusive interviews with powerful heads of state who will reveal for their publications alone the great secrets of the day.

During the past week, President Nguyen Van Thieu has ably played upon the egos of the members of Saigon's small press corps and a number of outside correspondents to wage a stunning publicity campaign in the United States as the Congress considers the crucial issue of further military aid for Saigon.

Thieu was reportedly advised in planning his campaign by U. S. Ambassador Graham Martin, who summoned at least two correspondents to his office and suggested to them that he had been instrumental in getting exclusive interviews for them.

"I was told [by the Vietnamese] that I was exclusive and first," exploded Frank Mariano of ABC News who flew in from Hong Kong to film Thieu for more than an hour Wednesday morning. Mariano said he was "disgusted" to learn a day later that Time magazine and The Washington Post had each had exclusive interviews with Thieu on Monday.

The point about exclusivity is that a publication or a network is likely to give better display to an interview if its own correspondent is alone and first with it.

By yesterday, when Thieu seemed to wind up his campaign by breakfasting with nine correspondents, it became clear that at least half a dozen had been led to believe that they would be alone and first in "scooping" the world.

The possible scoop seemed all the better because Thieu had apparently not granted an interview to a foreign correspondent since two years ago when Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci conducted her famous lively exchange

Mr. McCombs is The Post's Saigon correspondent.

with him.

I thought my own interview with Thieu was the first in two years, so it was a slight comedown to learn last night from Peter Ross Range of Time magazine that he was being ushered out one door of the President's office only minutes before I was ushered in. Range's material, of course, will have to wait until next week's issue of Time.

Said Range: "I was given to believe I was the first in two years, and I had no idea my exclusivity would last only 10 minutes."

We also learned that French television had interviewed Thieu last week.

The News Business

The new Chicago Daily News correspondent in town, Robert Tamarkin, also thought he was going to be first and alone with Thieu. Tamarkin said he thought he had had "beginner's luck" during his first week in town when Information Minister Ho Van Cham assured him at a cocktail party, "No problem, I can get you an exclusive interview."

The Wall Street Journal's Peter Kann received an urgent cable in Hong Kong from the Vietnamese government advising him to come to Saigon quickly.

Both Tamarkin and Kann were included in the large breakfast group. "I didn't think I'd have a worldwide exclusive," said Kann, "but I thought it would be a small group." Had he known the situation, Kann said he wouldn't have come to Saigon.

James Markham of The New York Times said, "As a consolation prize I was allowed to sit at the President's

right hand" at the breakfast.

Despite the bashing of journalistic egos, most of the correspondents seemed glad that Thieu had finally emerged from his seclusion.

Kann found him "charming," even if the subject matter was a bit "dreary." Over Vietnamese noodle soup and omelettes Thieu exchanged jokes with the correspondents and revealed some details of his personal life.

Despite his disappointment at not scooping the world, ABC's Mariano said he had "a very, very warm interview, very nice" in which there were poignant moments.

For example, said Mariano, Thieu said that if he doesn't get \$300 million in emergency U.S. military aid, "it would psychologically break the backs of the Vietnamese people."

Mariano asked Thieu about Cambodia, and the President reportedly replied, "How can I help Cambodia when I can barely help myself?"

While Thieu spoke competently in English, most of the correspondents found that, as one put it, "His English has gotten worse since the Americans left." If he keeps on giving "exclusive" interviews, it could improve with practice.

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