

## Sudden Shift in Thieu Strategy Is Called Key Factor in Debacle

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 25 — Western military specialists here say that the key factor in what has become a rout of Saigon Government forces was the suddenness of President Nguyen Van Thieu's decision to shift from a strategy of defending territory to abandoning it.

While the switch was sound, one analyst said, it was conveyed to officers in the field so hastily and was carried out with so little coordination that many units simply began to abandon their positions without a fight.

Moreover, the analyst said, the orders to pull out from some indefensible positions created a snowball effect, leading to a sense of panic and then rout. This is believed to be what happened in the last two days at Tam Ky and Quang Ngai, two provincial capitals on the north-central coast that were reported abandoned by their Government defenders after only preliminary shelling by the North Vietnamese.

What prompted President Thieu's sudden switch in strategy, Western officials say, was the Communists' unexpected success in overrunning the Central Highlands city of Ban Me Thuot on March 14. With North Vietnamese troops fighting in the city, Mr. Thieu reportedly was advised by his commanders that there was only one operational CH-47 heavy transport helicopter available to ferry in reinforcements.

In earlier years of the war, when the American forces were

here, there would have been dozens if not hundreds of helicopters immediately available to transport in a regiment or even a division of troops.

### Mobility Now Limited

Under the Americans, one diplomat said, "the basic premise of defending South Vietnam was based on mobility and fire power. "But with the cutback in United States aid in the last two years limiting the number of helicopters and planes and the amount of gasoline for flying them, the Government forces have found themselves less mobile than the Communists.

At the same time, without the constant threat of United States air strikes, the North Vietnamese have constructed an extensive network of roads in South Vietnam and have moved in a large number of their sophisticated anti-aircraft batteries, making it difficult for Saigon's airforce to provide air cover for South Vietnamese troops.

As a result, the South Vietnamese have had to rely on bombing by fighter planes from above 10,000 feet, too high for accuracy. At Ban Me Thuot, according to a senior Western official, the bombs accidentally knocked out the headquarters of the Government's 23d division, crippling the army's defense effort in the city.

To cope with the Government's weakened strategic position, President Thieu is said to have decided to hold only those positions that can be supplied — and evacuated — by road or by sea.