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President Thieu: "To be president in a peaceful country . . . is not interesting."

Americans Main Factor In Thieu's Presidency

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When Nguyen Van Thieu rose to power in South Vietnam by outmaneuvering his rivals, it hardly seemed likely that he would be a central figure in world affairs for a decade to come.

Conservative, suspicious, and unremarkable in appearance, he possessed neither the Mandarin dignity nor erratic flamboyance on which other Vietnamese leaders based their appeal. But Thieu was able to hold and expand a power that became nearly total because he had a decisive asset: the full support of the United States.

Weary of the coups and counter-coups that made an international laughing stock of the fledgling nation to which they had committed themselves, American officials embraced

Thieu and his ally, air marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, when they took over as head of a new military government in 1965. Ten governments had come and gone since the American-supported ouster of President Ngo Dinh Diem two years before.

The brash and dashing Ky, as prime minister, held the headlines for the next two years, while Thieu built support behind the scenes. After he was elected president in 1967, he and the Americans developed a relationship based on mutual need that Thieu once compared to a troubled marriage. "Between man and wife there are fights," he said, "yet they don't necessarily become enemies because of that . . . Moreover, their fights must take place in the bedroom, after the door has been locked. They must never take place in front of the children."

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The former general provided the continuity, stability and willingness to embrace the forms of democracy that the United States believed essential for implementing the plans and programs by which they hoped to turn South Vietnam into an independent republic.

He never really believed in Western-style democracy, which he regarded as a dangerous luxury for a country at war, but used it to legitimize the power he had seized by intrigue.

And once Thieu was duly elected, under a constitution the U.S. embassy in Saigon helped to draft, the Americans let it be known that they would tolerate no more nonsense. Continuation of the American effort would depend on uninterrupted functioning of the new government—a hollow threat, in the view of many analysts, but one that Thieu was able to use to keep his generals in line and subdue his political opponents. The war, and the Americans, combined to make him indispensable.

As recently as April 3, President Ford referred to Thieu as "a head of state elected by the people." That was what Thieu appeared to be, and what the Americans of the Johnson administration desperately wanted him to be: the popularly elected head of an independent, self-sustaining South Vietnamese republic.

In fact, no such nation really existed, as Thieu well knew. It unraveled the first time it was seriously tested in the absence of American sustenance, and the president who embodied the institution, Nguyen Van Thieu, was doomed to go with it.

Thieu was not altogether a puppet of the American embassy, which he periodically defied on issues great and small. He was a complex and skillful man who manipulated his mentors perhaps as much as they manipulated him.

Although he was never a charismatic or popular figure, he probably rose highest in the esteem of his countrymen in the fall of 1972 when he held out for months against acceptance of a peace agreement the Americans had worked out with North Vietnam but which he viewed as inimical to South Vietnam's survival.

In the words of Charles Yost, former American ambassador to the United Nations, Thieu was one of "those clients to whom we have so totally committed ourselves that they can afford to ignore our advice and our interests."

By his own standards, Thieu was a patriot. He fought South Vietnam's long fight with toughness, courage and determination, at least for as long as he and his generals believed the Americans were beside them.

He survived military and political crises that would have brought down lesser men. He showed flashes of wit and surprising introspection when he allowed himself to talk freely. He endorsed, at least in public, thoroughgoing social and institutional reforms in South Vietnam.

Pacification, land reform, free elections, economic expansion, miracle rice, militia training, all the building blocks of the nation-state were put in place with fanfare during Thieu's tenure, financed by billions of American dollars. In most of the country, none of it survived its first big challenge after the departure of U.S. planes and men.

Thieu often described himself as a peace-loving man who wanted to be remembered as the man who brought peace to his country. But his presidency was a creature of the war.

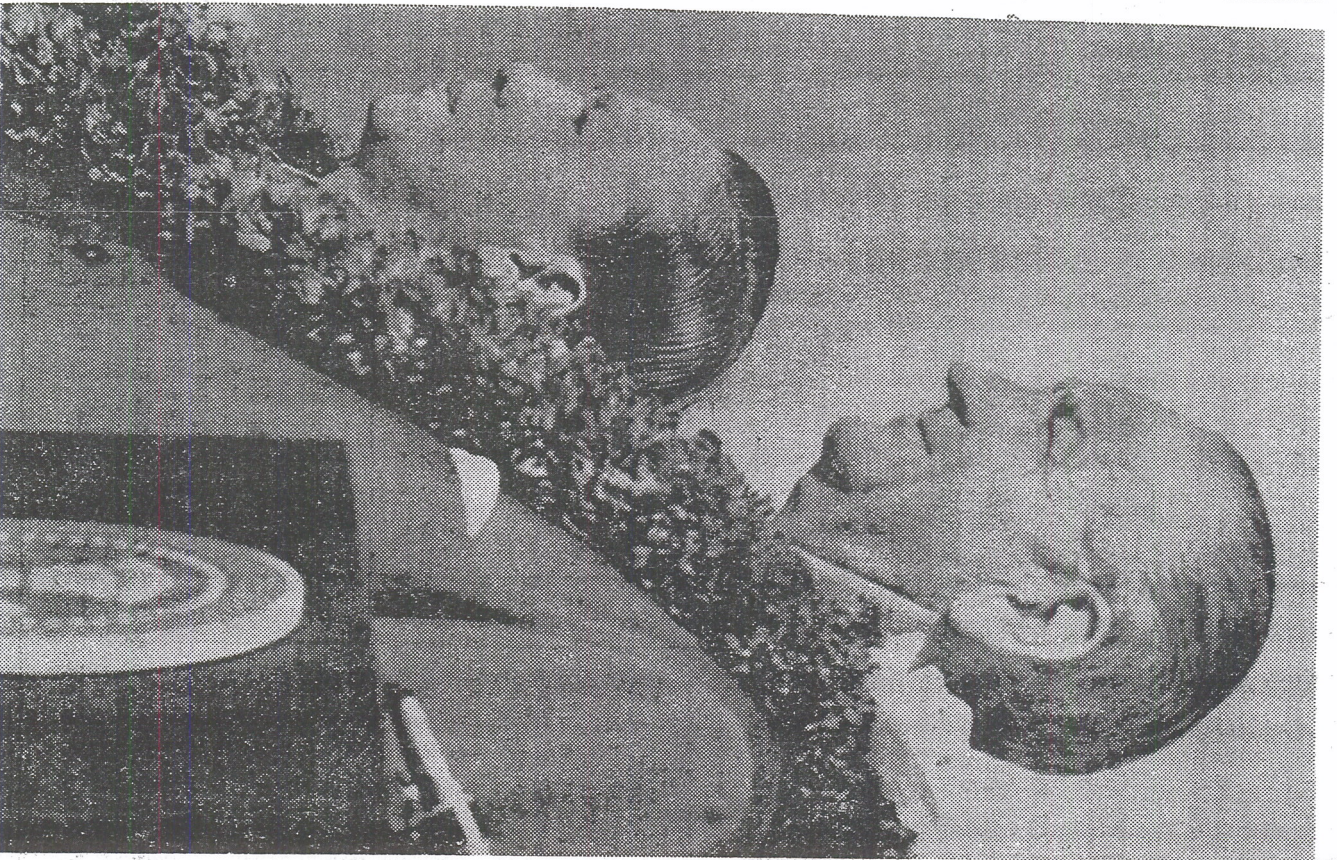
He used the presence of the enemy, the threat of Communist attack and subversion, as a whip against his domestic opponents. The war gave him cause to imprison dissidents, impose martial law, exile rivals, close newspapers and continue provincial administration in the hands of army officers.

"To be president in a peaceful country, in peacetime, is not interesting," he once told a group of journalists. It was a role he was destined never to play. From the time of his boyhood, life in Vietnam has been dominated by war.

Thieu was born April 5, 1923, in a fishing village near Phanrang, on the coast of the South China Sea northeast of Saigon, the youngest of five children. His first experience of war, he recalled later, came in 1942, during the Japanese occupation of Vietnam, when bombs fell on his native village.

When the French returned after the war, Thieu served briefly with Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh rebels. After about a year, he became convinced that the Vietminh were Communists first and nationalists afterward, so he left them and went to Saigon to continue his education.

With the help of a brother who had risen in the world, he obtained an appointment to a merchant marine school. But when he discovered that the French would pay him less than they would pay a French officer, he turned down a shipboard berth and transferred to the Vietnamese National Military Academy in Dalat. Commissioned a lieutenant, he entered the service of the French against the Vietminh.



President Thieu is shown at meetings with President Nixon on Midway Is land in June, 1969, and with President Johnson in Honolulu in July, 1968.

United Press International

He rose rapidly to the rank of major. In 1954, the last year of the French war, he is said to have called in artillery fire on his own family home during an attack on the Vietminh. He made a career of military command after the 1954 Geneva convention, taking additional training in the United States and holding a variety of posts until the early 1960s.

During that time, he converted to Roman Catholicism, the religion of his wife and of President Diem, a factor that was in his favor when Diem reshuffled military commands to give the units based nearest Saigon to officers he trusted. Thieu was commander of the Fifth Infantry Division, strategically located at Bienhoa, just outside the capital at the time of the coup against Diem in 1963.

The leaders of that coup, especially Gens. Duong Van (Big) Minh and Tran Van Don, soon became familiar names in American news accounts of events in Vietnam, but Thieu, who temporized over the coup until its outcome was certain before committing himself, remained an obscure figure.

He held the position of secretary general of the Military Revolutionary Council that took control of the government under Big Minh's leadership. But through most of 1964, attention was focused on Gen. Nguyen Khanh, who ousted Big Minh after only three months, on the revolving-door succession of military and civilian governments that followed, and on the so-called Tonkin Gulf incident, the reported attack on two U.S. destroyers that triggered direct American military intervention.

It was a period of confusion and turmoil in both Vietnam and the United States. While political intriguers shuffled cabinets in Saigon, the Vietcong were seizing vast stretches of the countryside. The American commitment was growing steadily. Restive Buddhists, whose repression had been partly responsible for Diem's ouster, were still a troublesome domestic problem.

"By early 1965," Chester Cooper said in his book, *The Lost Crusade*, "American policy was clearly floundering . . . It was apparent both from official briefings and first-hand evidence that the Vietcong held the initiative throughout much of the Vietnamese countryside and could mount a considerable campaign of terror within the limits of Saigon itself. The Vietnamese government, despite all the help it had been given, seemed unable to hold the Communist forces in check."

It was in that atmosphere of coup and crisis that Thieu first entered the national government as deputy premier and defense minister under Tran Van Huong, later vice president in Thieu's second term.

That was in January, 1965. Huong was gone by June 18 of that year, when Ky became premier and Thieu his chief of state. That ended the succession of toppling governments, with President Johnson committing himself to Ky and Thieu at the Honolulu conference several months later. But by that time the United States was bom-

bing North Vietnam, American troops were pouring in, and the entire conflict had entered a new phase.

When Ky and Thieu took office, Dennis Bloodworth, an experienced British observer of Southeast Asian politicians, described the new government as "natty little men with slicked down hair," indistinguishable from their predecessors. That was a commonly held view at the time, but it was erroneous. Ky was popular, flashy, and congenial to Johnson, despite such gaffes as his observation that Vietnam needed a new Hitler. And Thieu proved to be made of sterner stuff than had been recognized up to that time.

The American objective in South Vietnam was always twofold: to defeat the Vietcong militarily and to create a nation out of the South Vietnamese tumult through governmental reorganization and the establishment of a democratic system.

Neither Thieu nor most of his countrymen ever thought the latter was achievable, or even desirable, in a country dominated by religious, familial and sectional politics, but it was a condition of continued American support in an ever-widening war, so they went along.

"Democracy as they have it in America . . . cannot exist here as yet," Thieu said years later. "We aren't ready for it yet. Don't forget that Vietnam never knew democratic life in the sense that you mean it. Until 1945, we were a French colony. Until 1954 we were dominated by the Vietminh. Until 1963 we were under President Diem. I take the liberty of affirming that democracy began to exist here in 1965."

The cornerstone of the newly created democracy was the national constitution, approved in 1967 by a constituent assembly under the watchful eyes of the military.

That constitution, strikingly similar to the American one, provided for the election of a president and vice president running on one ticket, and of a two-house national assembly. The presidential election of 1967 was the first big test of the new system, of popular participation, of security in the countryside, and of the losers' willingness to accept the results.

Ky and Thieu pledged that they would not run against each other, but both announced their candidacies. The outcome was settled not at the polls but months before, at a three-day meeting attended by 48 generals. That was, by all accounts, a tearful and overwrought bargaining session at which Thieu prevailed. Gen. Cao Van Vien, who arranged the meeting, later became chairman of the Joint General Staff under Thieu, to no one's surprise.

Ky agreed to run as Thieu's vice presidential candidate, and the result was almost a foregone conclusion. Thieu hardly campaigned, though he was always effective in a crowd, but the dozen civilian candidates shuttled energetically around the country, promoting the notion that a genuine contest was under way.

Big Minh and a popular neutralist

named Au Truong Thanh were barred from running. It came as no surprise that Thieu and Ky won easily, outdistancing the nearest rival by 2 to 1; but they and the Americans were shocked that a little-known lawyer who used a peace dove as his election symbol, Truong Dinh Dzu, came in second.

Shortly afterward, Dzu was tried on previously filed charges involving financial speculations and sent to prison.

By the time Thieu took office, Ellsworth Bunker was the American ambassador to South Vietnam. He and Thieu developed a close working relationship and American support for the duly elected, popularly supported president never wavered, despite crises and blunders that strained their relationship.

Backed by the United States, Thieu skillfully consolidated his power. He neutralized the coffee-house malcontents, sent disgruntled generals in to exile, built up the national police, and worked hard at seeking popular allegiance.

His overall policy was inflexible, summarized by his famous doctrine of the "Four No's"—no coalition government, no territorial concessions, no Communist activity in South Vietnam, and no pro-Communist neutralism.

He exasperated the Americans, and the world, by refusing to attend the Paris peace negotiations that began in

1968. He infuriated the U.S. mission—except, apparently, for Bunker—by jailing a popular national assemblyman named Tran Ngoc Chau, violating his legislative immunity and ignoring a ruling by the South Vietnamese supreme court that Chau's trial was illegal.

In fact, over the years, Thieu made blunder after blunder. He installed a rice-stealing incompetent as head of food distribution to refugees in Danang; he left a weak and cowardly general, heading an untried division, guarding the vital Demilitarized Zone; he set unrealistic goals and impossible deadlines for this or that accomplishment; he invited the wrath of the sects by announcing plans to draft Buddhist monks and seminarians.

Perhaps most damaging of all, he ran for re-election unopposed in 1971 after manipulating the conditions of the election so that both Ky and Big Minh decided not to challenge him. The Americans made no secret of their disappointment, but by that time no other national leader was in sight and there was no legitimate way to install anyone else in power.

Thieu was an easy man to underestimate. With his bland face and conservative style, surrounded by flinty-eyed bodyguards, he looked like less than he was.



Associated Press

Then-Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, right, shown with Thieu in 1963, gave up a challenge and ran on the same ticket as Thieu.

He had one of the world's most difficult jobs, and he not only survived but gained in strength after each new crisis: the Tet offensive of 1968, the ill-fated 1971 invasion of Laos, the Easter assault and loss of Quangtri in 1972, the arm-twisting by Henry A. Kissinger that forced him to sign the Paris peace agreement, the pullout of the American troops and planes. Until the loss of the Highlands city of Banmethuot that set off the rout of Saigon's best troops, Thieu seemed firmly in control and would surely have won a third term in the 1975 elections.

It is probable that few if any Westerners really understood the relationship between Thieu and the people of South Vietnam. Just before the Paris accords, for example, Thieu went on nationwide radio with a long, emotional speech in colloquial language saying his country would never accept its proposed terms.

Some Vietnamese complained that Thieu had violated the dignity of his office by the style and tone of his address; others praised him for talking at last in a language the ordinary people could respond to.

The criticism of Thieu lasted as long as his regime: that he was corrupt, that he kept and tortured political prisoners, that he preferred continuation of the war to a negotiated peace. He rejected them all, sometimes vigorously, sometimes wearily.

He once proclaimed death to corrupt officials and drug traffickers and announced a new anti-corruption campaign, ignoring the fact that the previous anti-corruption campaign was still

going on. He proclaimed corruption a national danger, "a national shame," and said he was determined to fight it. It remained a fact of daily life at every level of army and government, as it is throughout Southeast Asia.

After the 1973 Paris accords, Thieu went through the motions of turning his country away from war and toward peace. He talked of tax reform and of reforming the civil service, of increasing the country's export trade and attracting tourists. But he never seemed really convinced that his country could go it alone.

"The French abandoned us in 1954, and because of that half of Vietnam fell to the Communists," he told the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci at the time of the Paris agreement. "If the United States does the same thing now, the other half will go. It has happened other times in history, when a country cannot resist an invader it simply lets the invader invade."

Throughout his presidency, he alternated between gregariousness and accessibility at times and virtual seclusion at others. He remained almost totally out of sight during the Easter offensive of 1972, prompting unfavorable comparisons with Diem, who totally lost touch with reality in his last days. Thieu himself was known to think more of Charles de Gaulle, the military man forced into politics to save his country, as his historical model.

But he differed from de Gaulle in more than physical stature. He could not rid himself, even two years after the Paris accords, of the notion that his country's fate was in the hands of America.

"I am very confident," he said in an interview with *The Washington Post* two years after the agreement, "that the United States, which has never lost any war, which has never failed to help any people who would like to preserve their independence," would come to his aid once again.