

Thieu: A Cautious Man Who 'Only Jumps When the Tide Mounts to His Toes'

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 21—Nguyen Van Thieu, who resigned the presidency of South Vietnam tonight, has had a reputation among fellow Vietnamese as an exceedingly cautious man who makes his move only at the last minute.

As the Vietnamese saying has it, he "only jumped when the tide mounted to his toes."

For 10 long years, first in his role as chief of state in the military regime that came to power in June, 1965, and then as the elected President since September, 1967, Mr. Thieu's caution, mixed with a shrewd sense of timing, unlimited American support and an army officer corps personally loyal to him, enabled him to survive.

Protests Didn't Sway U.S.

His ability to suppress the political strife that followed the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in November, 1963, so impressed the Americans that they backed him to the hilt. Three Presidents—Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford—and two ambassadors to Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker and Graham A. Martin, never seemed to waver in their support.

Even when his autocratic methods and stubborn prosecution of the war raised an

outry in Saigon or in the United States, when he conducted a one-man race for reelection in 1971, when he resisted Secretary of State Kissinger's efforts to reach a negotiated settlement in Paris—American support did not cease.

The man whose career survived for so many years in the face of the Vietcong, of a huge North Vietnamese army, and growing antiwar sentiment in the United States was not a prepossessing leader. His manner was not dramatic; his speeches, like his hour-and-a-half address tonight announcing his resignation, tended to be long, rambling, dreary and often incoherent.

An Exhausted Nation

Unlike President Diem, whom Mr. Thieu, then a colonel, helped to overthrow in 1963, he was neither loved nor deeply hated, at least not until the last year. Though he commanded a vast police apparatus and did not hesitate to throw his enemies in jail—his unsuccessful opponent in the 1967 election, Truong Dinh Dzu, for instance—he somehow used his power less oppressively than Mr. Diem had, and generated less passionate emotions.

In many ways Mr. Thieu presided over a balance of weakness, despite the Vietnam's million-man army, the

police force and the large bureaucracy.

He entered the political scene at a time when the South Vietnamese were becoming emotionally exhausted from years of war and turmoil. This was intensified by the Communists' Tet offensive of 1968 and the North Vietnamese spring offensive of 1972.

Most people simply became indifferent to official exhortation from any side, and this worked out to Mr. Thieu's benefit.

Disillusion With Vietnam

For the son of a small landowner and part-time fisherman it was a long road to power. Nguyen Van Thieu was born on April 5, 1923, the youngest of five children, in the village of Tri Thuy on the central coast. The village is near Phan Rang, the province capital that was lost to the invading North Vietnamese on Thursday.

Every Vietnamese holds his native place in deep affection, and many Vietnamese believed tonight that Mr. Thieu must have been psychologically hurt by the loss to a Communist infantry division of the capital of his home province of Ninh Tui.

Mr. Thieu's older brothers helped put him through French schools. When World War II ended and the French returned to Vietnam Mr. Thieu and many fellow Vietnamese threw in

their lot with the nationalist Vietnam of Ho Chi Minh.

He soon became disillusioned. "I knew that the Vietnamese were Communists," he once said in an interview. "They shot people, they overthrew the village committees, they seized the land."

Convinced that the Vietnamese were dangerous, Mr. Thieu went secretly to Saigon where, with the help of his older brother, Nguyen Van Hieu, now South Vietnam's ambassador to Rome, he was admitted to the Merchant Marine Academy.

After a year he received an officer's rating, but he turned down a berth on a ship when he discovered that the French owners intended to pay him a lower salary than they paid their French officers.

He then transferred to the Vietnamese National Military Academy in Da Lat, which the French had established to train officers for the newly created Vietnamese Army. He became a successful officer and developed an excellent grasp of French, but his experience left him suspicious of all foreigners.

In 1951, he married the daughter of a prosperous practitioner of native medicine in My Tho in the Mekong delta. A Roman Catholic and Mr. Thieu adopted her religion. Later, and conveniently, it was also the predominant religion of the Diem regime.

to His Toes'

The Diem family advanced his career, making him commander of the Da Lat academy, where he formed close ties with many of the men what later became officers in his army. Surviving coups and counter-coups that brought a succession of short-lived governments to power, Mr. Thieu rose steadily. When he was commander of the IV Corps, which embraces the populous Mekong Delta, he attracted the attention of American officials who were impressed with his ability as a strategist.

The Rivalry With Ky

Joining with Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, Mr. Thieu helped oust the military Government in late 1964 and became a member of the new ruling Armed Forces Council. For the next three years he and the more flamboyant Marshal Ky were rivals for power. With American backing, Mr. Thieu emerged in 1967 as the more powerful man, and ran successfully for President.

His caution and penchant for muddling through a crisis rather than taking swift action served him well when he stalled off Mr. Kissinger's attempts to get him to sign the Paris peace agreement in the fall of 1972. The delay allowed Mr. Thieu to win slightly more favorable terms and get new arms shipments from the United States. But this year, when the Communists began their of-

Last column sacrificed.