

Thieu's Successor

Tran Van Huong

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 21—Many years ago, in the prosperous Mekong delta town of My Tho, a popular, respected teacher presided over the local school.

Man
in the
News

The teacher lived simply and tried to instill in his students a rigorous belief in the Confucian principles of righteousness and integrity.

He apparently succeeded, at least to the extent of producing highly motivated and disciplined pupils. One of them, Huynh Tan Phat, went on to become chairman of the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Today, with the resignation of President Nguyen Van Thieu, the old teacher, Tran Van Huong, becomes the new President of South Vietnam and is charged with the task of negotiating the end of the war with his former student. A formidable job for any man, for Mr. Huong, who is 71 years old, it would appear to be an impossible one.

He has suffered for years from rheumatism and last year he had a nearly fatal bout of kidney trouble for which he had to go to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D. C. A stocky man, he walks uneasily with the aid of a cane, and when he makes one of his rare public appearances as he did this evening to take the oath of office, his voice wavers.

Few Vietnamese think of him as more than a figurehead and few feel that he will be able to last long in his new office.

Lived Up to Expectations

Mr. Thieu picked Mr. Huong as his vice-presidential running mate in 1971 partly because he felt Mr. Huong would not try to exert power or challenge his rule. In that respect Mr. Thieu was right.

Since taking the job Mr. Huong had lived quietly in the Vice President's carefully guarded white villa, emerging only rarely for a ceremonial appearance at Mr. Thieu's side. Few noticed him and few thought it likely that he would succeed to the presidency.



Black Star

A stern moralism

Mr. Huong was, once one of the most respected political figures in South Vietnam, a leading intellectual, an idealist, a solid member of the opposition to autocracy and corruption in office.

Having built his reputation during his long years as a teacher, he gained wide popularity in a brief term, his second, as Mayor of Saigon in 1964, when he role to work on a bicycle and moved vigorously to root out corruption in City Hall—something no one else has done before or since.

Lasted Only Three Months

Called Uncle, a term of respect, by his fellow Vietnamese, Mr. Huong reached the height of his popularity when he was named Premier in November, 1964, when Nguyen Khanh was President. There was widespread hope then that Mr. Huong would move effectively to re-establish standards of civil morality, because he was a native Southerner—he was born in Vinh Long Province in the delta, on Dec. 1, 1903—and a Confucian.

President Ngo Dinh Diem, who had been ousted and slain a year before, was a native of Central Vietnam and an ardent Roman Catholic. The split between the Southerners, who are largely Buddhist or Confucian, and the North and Central Viet-

namese, many of whom are Catholics, has always been a bitter one in Saigon politics. Mr. Thieu is a Catholic from Central Vietnam.

Despite his popularity Mr. Huong lasted less than three months as Premier, proving both a weak administrator and an unsuccessful mediator in the Buddhist-Catholic conflict.

In 1967, he ran against Mr. Thieu in the latter's first presidential campaign, coming in fourth on a ticket pledged to seek a negotiated settlement of the war.

Despite his public career Mr. Huong, according to associates, has always been something of a loner. He has been separated from his wife, Luu Thi Thieu, the daughter of a poor peasant and no kin of the outgoing President, since about 1950. He has two sons, one missing since he joined the Vietminh insurgency against the French in 1946 and the other an employe here of the United States Government and Esso. Sometimes he has lived by himself, sometimes with relatives, and occasionally with former students, whom he is said to regard more as disciples, in the old Chinese sense.

Friends say that Mr. Huong's Teddy Bear-like features under a crew cut mask a stern, rather old-fashioned moralism and a deep belief in the importance of national authority and order. In an interview he once interjected that he could not understand the slogans of modern American youth such as "Make love, not war" and added: "They should be stopped, I would not allow that as, Prime Minister."

Scholarship Student

The new President's father was a poor farmer; his mother sold soup in the market. As a young man he was lucky enough to go through French schools on scholarship, graduating from the Hanoi School of Pedagogy in 1926.

After almost three decades as a teacher he entered the political world when he was appointed Mayor of Saigon by President Diem in 1954. That time he lasted six months; later he was briefly jailed by Mr. Diem for protesting his autocratic control.

He served another term as Premier from May, 1968, to September, 1969.

Given his reputation for integrity and opposition to the war, it was a major surprise when he agreed to run with Mr. Thieu in 1971. In explanation he said at the time that he had acceded to Mr. Thieu's request because he could not relax while the country was in danger.

He acknowledged that he was now a politician with little vigor. What he would rather do, he said, was stay at home. "At my age, I enjoy my books, my birds and my plants," he said.