

# Next Steps in Vietnam . . .

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The resignation of Nguyen Van Thieu as President of South Vietnam lessens the probability of a bloody fight to the finish that had been haunting the city of Saigon. An entirely new situation now exists, and the Vietnamese parties have at last a clear opportunity for an orderly political evolution consistent with the 1973 Paris agreements.

With ten divisions of the North Vietnamese Army still ringing the South Vietnamese capital, and three-quarters of the country severed from Saigon's political and military authority, there can be no illusions about where the power lies at this juncture. Nor can Saigon nurture any realistic hope of pursuing further the ruinous policy that brought President Thieu to his downfall. The situation in Vietnam is far more complicated than a straightforward military conquest of one country by another, however, and talks toward a political settlement will not necessarily be the equivalent of negotiation by victor's *diktat*.

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For weeks past, representatives of the pro-Communist Provisional Revolutionary Government have assured neutral diplomats that they stood prepared to enter political negotiations with a Saigon Government more representative and more committed to the Paris accords than the regime of President Thieu. There are indications that Hanoi's overwhelming forces have deliberately held back from direct attack on the capital for the past several days, in the expectation that General Thieu would withdraw.

Under the Paris agreements, South Vietnam's political future is to be determined by a National Council of Reconciliation and Concord, composed in equal measure of representatives from the P.R.G., the Saigon Government and a third group of mutually acceptable politicians unaffiliated with either force.

The French Government, which has been actively mediating behind the scenes for several weeks, took the initiative yesterday in proposing the urgent commencement of talks toward the formation of such a council. Even before that possibly cumbersome process gets under way, military representatives of the two Vietnamese sides could well meet at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport to agree on an immediate cease-fire in place, pending discussions on longer-term political arrangements—discussions in which Hanoi and the P.R.G. may not remain in total accord.

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The United States should do nothing to impede this process, and there is every reason to continue the evacuation of all but the most essential American personnel from Saigon. The presence of thousands of Americans in the besieged capital has only posed an extra irritant in recent weeks; their main function was to assist, in one way or another, in a war effort which has now collapsed. Continued evacuation now in no way precludes ongoing American assistance in refugee relief and other emergency humanitarian functions, however, if requested by the new civil authorities. Evacuation of thousands of Vietnamese who may feel in danger from their past close associations with the United States mission can now become a matter for orderly negotiations among the Vietnamese parties.

South Vietnam's future remains cloudy and the tragedy of the Vietnamese people is far from over. But the capital city of Saigon, its normal population swollen by refugees from the fighting all around, has presumably been spared the fate of an enemy conquest that until yesterday had seemed so imminent.