

...After President Thieu

The bitterness toward the United States with which President Thieu left office reflects his mistaken belief that the Paris "peace" agreements were in fact his license to continue the war under another guise. From what has now been learned about former President Nixon's secret correspondence prior to South Vietnam's reluctant adherence to those accords, it is reasonable to conclude that his American allies did little to disabuse President Thieu of this conviction.

The war never stopped in Vietnam. The attempt to embark on an era of national reconciliation, in all the pious terms hammered out in Paris, never got under way. Only when the full diplomatic correspondence is released for public inspection will it be possible to know for certain whether this was the tacit intent of Saigon and Washington all along.

Enough is known now, however, to indicate that President Thieu was given to believe that he could count on Washington's military and political support for his Government to an extent far beyond the written agreements signed in Paris.

One after another, Administration officials were dispatched to Saigon to assure President Thieu that the United States regarded him as the "sole legitimate Government" in South Vietnam; the carefully evolved program for political compromise defined in Paris disappeared quickly from subsequent American rhetoric in favor of praise for the "development of political institutions and . . . the political stability that has prevailed in South Vietnam." These emissaries, President Thieu declared yesterday, further committed the United States to prevent any new North Vietnamese "aggression," a commitment absent from any of the official documents which the Nixon Administration conveyed to Congress.

Secretary of State Kissinger admitted earlier this month that President Thieu had received promise of "vigorous reaction" from this country in the event that North Vietnam violated the truce on a large scale. However, the Congress had banned further American military engagement in Indochina as early as August, 1973; hence any promise of "vigorous reaction" involving an American combat role was a promise which from that date on, could not possibly be fulfilled.

President Thieu's decade in office turned out to be

disastrous for the people of South Vietnam. He did bring to their government a strong central leadership to replace the series of coups and shifting juntas that threatened the nation with collapse from within; but throughout his tenure his strongest prop was his near-certain ability to deliver the largesse of the United States—the troops, planes and missiles, and the military and economic supplies that kept the society more or less together as it enriched the ruling group of Saigon.

But his program for leadership prescribed war; there was no room in it either for compromise with his non-Communist political enemies or for the kind of compromise peace that the world was allowed to believe had been achieved in Paris. When that war policy failed, through his own strategic errors as well as the crumbling of his American mainstay, President Thieu could no longer maintain his near-autocratic rule over the people of Vietnam.