

He lost his country
but gained an audience

Ky: Striking it rich on lecture tour

By Peter Arnett
Associated Press

CEDAR FALLS, Iowa — "I'm a loser," the trim, mustachioed speaker told the lecture hall audience. It was no understatement.

Nguyen Cao Ky, former flamboyant flyboy, premier and vice president of South Vietnam, has lost both a war and a country and is a stateless refugee in the United States.

But, like other notable losers in recent times, particularly those of Watergate notoriety, the youthful-looking Ky is cashing in on his fame on the college lecture circuit.

"He'll probably be just a one-season rock 'n' roll band," said an observer in wondering how long the South Vietnamese leader can keep commanding \$2,500 lecture fees from American campuses. A dozen colleges with a lingering interest in Vietnam have signed up to hear him.

But the 46-year-old Ky, who denies reports that he fled Saigon with a satchel filled with \$50 and \$100 dollar bills, has high hopes the fees will keep rolling in. Those hopes are buttressed by his mini-celebrity status on the road.

Ky told student leaders who met his plane at Des Moines: "If I had known people liked me so much I would have worn my black flying suit, lavender scarf and baseball cap."

The student leaders who have invited Ky to speak apparently expect fireworks. Boston College canceled an appearance because of student protests. Ky himself acts surprised at the sudden bursts of antagonism that he encounters on campus.

When told that the "Controversial Speakers Committee" that invited him to the University of Northern Iowa had earlier brought to campus leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, the American Nazi Party and the militant prostitution movement, Ky

looked genuinely shocked.

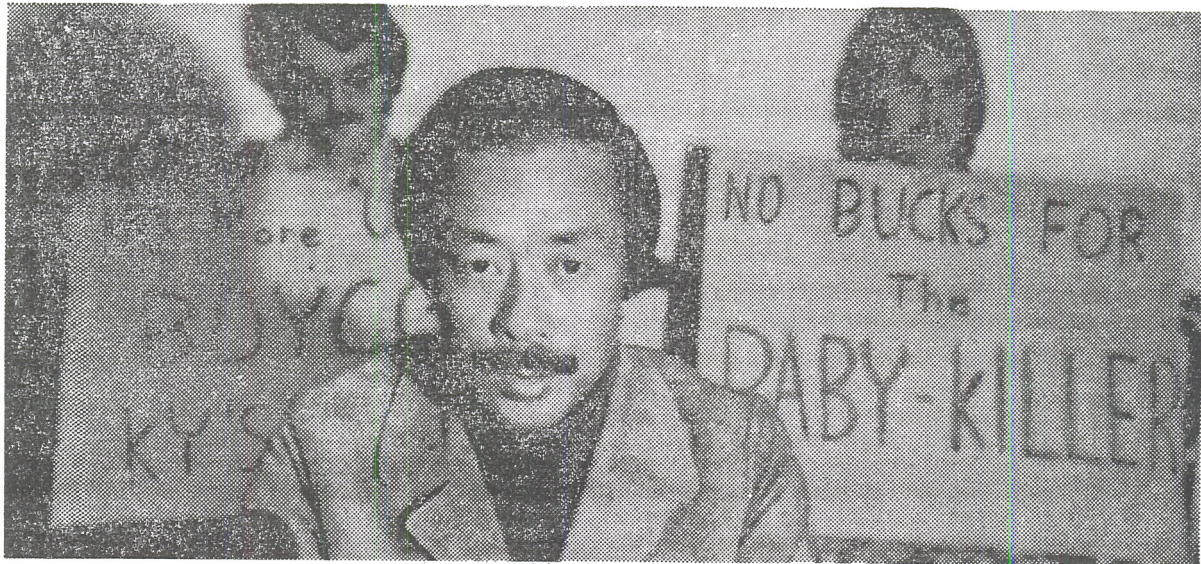
And he also seems taken aback by the directness and persistence of student questioners. He has learned to rue the day he casually commented to a reporter that South Vietnam needed a dictator who could pull the country together as Hitler did in Germany after World War I.

In two days of campus appearances in Iowa, Ky was asked 11 times "Why is Hitler your idol?"

"Why do you keep asking me that?" Ky finally complained, insisting he was commenting on the methods Hitler used to gather power rather than the way he exercised it.

Students also are not shy of asking Ky about his alleged wealth, and the narcotics business rumored to be the source of it.

"I brought \$40,000 out of Vietnam with me," Ky told them. "But I brought 14 members of my immediate family with me also. I am down to \$30,000 and spending fast."



Former South Vietnamese premier Nguyen Cao Ky still attracts protests AP Photo

Ky denied he was ever personally involved in the heroin traffic that brought drug addiction to thousands of American GIs in Vietnam, but said: "Many were involved, and it was easy for a pilot on a liaison mission to Laos to load up with cheap dope and sell it for a big profit when he got home."

As the only former Vietnamese leader appearing in public, Ky is bearing the brunt of the vestiges of the anti-war movement. About a dozen people picketed the college lecture hall at Cedar Falls, one with a sign reading: "Does this murderer speak for the Vietnamese people?" About 800 attended the lecture.

The main thrust of Ky's campus remarks, which he delivers in precise, quietly spoken sentences, blames the Vietnam debacle on the former South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu with whom Ky served as vice president from 1967 to 1971.

It was Thieu's bid for total power in the election of 1971 "that marked the biggest defeat for the non-Communist Vietnamese, and it also marked the

beginning of the end," Ky said. Thieu was personally corrupt "and the dictatorship he established was not much different from the Communist one in the North," Ky said.

Ky describes himself as "young and politically innocent" when he was prime minister in 1966 and 1967. But Ky said he was ready to try the job again this past year and had gathered enough support to launch a coup d'etat against Thieu a few weeks before the fall of Saigon. The attempt was stopped by the U.S. Embassy, Ky said.

Ky also made pitches for more aid to 130,000 Vietnamese refugees now in the United States, even though he denied he was attempting to become their leader.

The former premier says he is now thinking in terms of a vegetable farm in the South as a possibility for his own employment. He seems to have discarded earlier plans to apply for a fast food chain franchise. He said his wife Mai intends to open a beauty parlor in Los Angeles "with some film-star friends."

A score of Vietnamese families greeted Ky in northern Iowa, and some expressed fear of the coming winter.

Ky got the second biggest laugh of the night by telling his audience at Drake University in Des Moines that he explained to an old Vietnamese woman that she should stay in bed all winter "just like the Iowa farmers do."

With the audience on his side, Ky got the biggest laugh of the evening in his reply to a persistent questioner who wanted to know why he left Saigon after telling everyone to stay and fight.

"Why did you run away?" the questioner demanded.

Ky replied: "I was fighting for freedom. So I ran away to find freedom in the United States."
