

NYTimes  
AUG 16 1971  
Thieu's Political Brinkmanship

The recall of Ambassador Bunker to Washington for consultations reflects the dangerous situation that has arisen in South Vietnam's presidential election campaign. There is a widespread belief that President Thieu is rigging the election—most blatantly through the maneuvers used to block the candidacy of the country's Vice President, Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky. Threats of withdrawal are being made by the only remaining challenger, Gen. Duong Van (Big) Minh, and many of his backers.

Minh's withdrawal clearly would discredit the election and President Thieu's pretensions to popular support, even if he proceeds to run as the sole candidate, as his aides insist he will, and obtains a large vote. More important for the United States, this development would undermine the moral basis for American involvement proclaimed by four Presidents: to enable the South Vietnamese people to choose their own government. And it could seriously injure what slim chances remain of ending the Indochina conflict through negotiations.

Even if President Thieu wins a fair election, it will be difficult to prevail upon the North Vietnamese to negotiate with him. "The stumbling block for them in negotiations really is the political settlement," President Nixon admitted at his news conference last week. "They feel that unless . . . a candidate . . . they are not as much against as they are President Thieu—unless it comes out that way, it will be very difficult for them to have a negotiated settlement."

If General Thieu clearly gains a popular victory in a reasonably fair election, Hanoi may have to take his political strength into account. But if he wins by unscrupulous means, the likelihood of future political instability in South Vietnam undoubtedly would encourage the Communists to go on with the war.

General Minh's decision evidently awaits the parliamentary elections Aug. 29. If the outcome there is reasonably fair to the opposition—despite the use of patronage, official funds, government transportation and the local bureaucracy to favor pro-Thieu candidates—Big Minh may stay in the race. But he has told visitors that, to protest unfair practices, he could withdraw right up to the last day before the Oct. 3 presidential election.

President Thieu professes to be sure that General Minh will not withdraw. His political brinkmanship has aroused concern in the American Embassy in Saigon and in Washington. But South Vietnam's President apparently sees in Ambassador Bunker's mild remonstrances evidence that Washington is not prepared to insist on a change. According to one of his associates, General Thieu has argued: "The Americans are going and I am staying, at least for four years. I should make the decision that I will have to live with. . . . The Americans no more want me to lose the war or become the victim of a coup than I do. They have virtually no alternative but to support me or withdraw."

Time is running out but there is still a chance before the final Supreme Court decision Aug. 24 on the Ky candidacy to change President Thieu's mind. If Ambassador Bunker is unwilling to do so, a special envoy should be dispatched. Despite the reduction in United States troops, American leverage remains overwhelming in Saigon if Washington wants to employ it. A firm word from the White House would be sufficient. The Saigon regime does not need to be reminded that its future, even after total American military withdrawal, will depend on economic and arms aid that the American Congress will have to vote.