

Political Suicide in Saigon

The presidential election and the whole constitutional system built painstakingly in South Vietnam over the past five years at the cost of 45,000 American lives now are being turned into a farce by President Thieu's clumsy maneuvers to assure his return to office with a large majority. Continued connivance by the American Ambassador in these extraordinary tactics—designed to create the appearance of a contested election, rather than the reality—will disgrace the United States before the world.

Ambassador Bunker's tut-tutting for eight months failed to convince General Thieu that the United States was more interested in a genuine election than in his victory. If that has not been the American position, it ought to be. It is still not too late for President Nixon to assert that view vigorously and change events in Saigon. He may have to change ambassadors at the same time.

It has been increasingly evident since January, when General Thieu began to push through his restrictive electoral law, that a significant choice for the South Vietnamese voters required at least a three-way race, a prospect that for a brief period appeared possible. It became clear that only a three-way race would give the chief opposition candidate, General Duong Van (Big) Minh, a chance of overcoming General Thieu's enormous advantages as a wartime incumbent in control of the police, the army, the state radio-television monopoly, the provincial governors, a huge bureaucracy, vast patronage and billions in American aid.

But despite these advantages—and others, less legal, that now are coming to light—President Thieu has resorted to one unscrupulous device after another to prevent multiple candidacies or even a three-way race. He purported not to believe General Minh's threats to withdraw from a rigged two-man race, leaving Mr. Thieu embassasingly alone on the ballot. And his hand-picked province chiefs and Supreme Court justices then proceeded on a technicality to block the last remaining third-party candidate, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky.

President Thieu's tricky turn around after General Minh's withdrawal, getting the Supreme Court to reinstate Air Marshal Ky as the sole opposition candidate—quickly closing the lists to prevent General Minh from returning to the race or Air Marshal Ky from removing his name—turns comedy into bathos. The crisis created by Big Minh's withdrawal cannot be overcome by this cosmetic solution, even if Ambassador Bunker, who evidently helped to instigate it, succeeds in his efforts to convince South Vietnam's ambitious Vice President to campaign.

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Neither the world nor the South Vietnamese people would consider a Thieu-Ky race as offering more than a tweedle dum-tweedle dee choice, however much the two men hate each other. General Minh's candidacy aroused interest because, though a former military man, he had the backing of important civilian opposition groups—the Buddhists, southern Catholics, intellectuals, students and anti-war elements generally. Moreover as President Nixon acknowledged on Aug. 4, there were indications that Hanoi's refusal to negotiate peace with the Saigon Government would give way to a new attitude if General Minh took the helm.

A three-way race can still be brought about, if President Nixon wants one. The first necessity is to respond to the evidence of alleged election rigging General Minh handed to the deputy American ambassador, Samuel Berger, on Aug. 12. One 5,000-word document contained President Thieu's secret directive to his province chiefs instructing them to harass the opposition and use all means to assure his election and that of pro-Government candidates. General Minh held up his withdrawal to give the United States time to remedy the situation; but Ambassador Bunker, then in Washington, evidently brought back to Saigon insufficient assurances that the Nixon Administration would insist on a fair election.

If such assurances were to be given, constitutional devices are available to reopen the presidential lists. The Supreme Court can be employed again for this purpose. Parliament could be brought back into session to amend the electoral law. As a last resort—perhaps the best alternative—a Thieu-Ky resignation would bring into being a caretaker government under the president of the senate that could enact a new electoral law and assure fair play to all parties.

The moral purpose of the United States in Vietnam from the beginning, proclaimed by every President from Eisenhower to Nixon, has been to enable the South Vietnamese people to choose their own government. If that effort now must be written off as a failure, there will no longer be even the appearance of a valid argument against speedy withdrawal of American troops and the termination of American military and economic aid.