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Mr. Nixon's Choice in Vietnam

Expressions of deep regret are scarcely a sufficient response by the White House to the political bungling by President Thieu, which now leaves him embarrassingly unopposed in South Vietnam's presidential election. What is needed is the kind of fresh thinking and bold reversal of established policy that President Nixon has exhibited recently in his approach to China and the economy.

The United States still has sufficient leverage to bring about the only type of contest that will give the South Vietnamese people a meaningful choice—a three-way race in which Mr. Thieu will have both Vice President Ky and General Duong Van Minh opposing him. Several constitutional ways exist to bring about such a contest, once the opposition candidates can be convinced the balloting will be fair.

One device, as Mr. Ky now has proposed, would be a Thieu-Ky resignation to bring into being, for three months, a caretaker government under the President of the Senate. Such a government could enact a new electoral law and assure fair play to all parties. President Thieu naturally finds this proposal repugnant; it is up to Washington to make it clear to him that if he wants to avoid this alternative, he must negotiate a less drastic solution with his rivals.

A possible approach would be replacement of South Vietnam's acting Premier, who controls the electoral machinery, with someone acceptable to the three candidates. Replacement of several pro-Thieu province chiefs—those who have already engaged in the most blatant election rigging—also would be essential.

Tripartite electoral commissions could be set up on an ad hoc basis to inspect voting lists, oversee the campaign, watch the polls and supervise the ballot-counting. President Thieu has offered such mixed commissions to the Communists as part of a negotiated settlement of the war. There is no reason why he should not offer them to his democratic opponents; and a demonstration that such commissions work might help encourage the Vietcong to negotiate peace.

Recall of Parliament for swift amendment of Mr. Thieu's grossly unfair election law would be possible, if the three candidates could agree in advance how to amend it. The essence of all solutions, in short, is a negotiated agreement among the three candidates on what to do. But the initiative must be taken by President Thieu, and he is unlikely to take it on his own.

That is where President Nixon could help. A special envoy to Saigon is vital now, someone who can speak to General Thieu with the firmness Ambassador Bunker has failed to display in the last eight months—then help as mediator to bring the three candidates to agreement.

There are risks in this procedure. President Thieu might be beaten. A degree of instability might develop. But the gain, psychologically and politically, would be enormous if a fair election were rescued from the Saigon mess. A one-candidate election, amounting to a plebiscite for Thieu, would be the worst defeat the United States has yet suffered in Vietnam.