

The Thieu-Bunker Tragedy

The promise of South Vietnam's President Thieu to resign if his political police, military governors and bureaucratic minions fail to stuff the ballot boxes adequately Oct. 3 in the one-man plebiscite he has substituted for a presidential election would be laughable if it were less tragic.

For Americans, who have given 45,000 lives in a war that has as one of its principal justifications protection for the right of the South Vietnamese to choose their own government, there is additional tragedy in the role played by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in this latest effort to throw sand in the eyes of public opinion both in Vietnam and overseas. Mr. Bunker has been meeting almost daily with Mr. Thieu and urging Washington to be patient pending a statement from South Vietnam's President that would save the situation. But no one can possibly be fooled by this pretense that political cancer is curable with cosmetics.

One shameful sequel to the election travesty has been Mr. Bunker's attempt at a background press briefing last weekend to shield Mr. Thieu by placing equal blame on the two former opposition candidates, General Duong Van Minh and Vice President Ky, whose only fault was insistence on a fair three-way election. That kind of an election can still be brought about, but only if President Thieu will negotiate agreed conditions for it with these ex-rivals, or resign now and let a caretaker government run the balloting.

Instead of more face-saving excuses of the Bunker variety, the wise course for President Nixon now would be to dispatch a special envoy to Saigon instructed to insist on change in a way that could not be disregarded. Unfortunately—and incomprehensibly—the President's disposition seems to be to acquiesce meekly in the Thieu farce. A White House statement even lauds the Saigon chief for introducing "an element of popular choice" into the non-election by saying he will treat it as a test of confidence. And Secretary of State Rogers shrugs off all the reports of political chicanery filed by American intelligence officers with the callous assertion that elections in this country aren't "pristine and pure" either.

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It is evident now that General Thieu has been seeking since the turn of the year to arrange a riskless two-man race that would have the appearance rather than the reality of a genuine contest. His first move was to force through a restrictive electoral law and then sign up so many of the national legislators and local councilmen that other candidates found it virtually impossible to obtain the required endorsements.

Meanwhile, the presidential palace sent out a secret directive to province chiefs instructing them to slander, harass and arrest the opposition and assure the election of pro-government candidates. The end result was that General Minh, the one candidate able to qualify, decided the cards were stacked against him and pulled out. Air Marshal Ky refused to act as cat's paw in a last-minute effort to give the election a camouflage air of legitimacy by putting him back on the ballot.

After all these switches, it is plain that a final reversal to restore a three-man race and give the Vietnamese people a real choice requires nothing more than a Thieu decision to do so. Several legal means exist to achieve a fair and full contest if President Nixon abandons the helpless stand taken by Secretary Rogers and impresses the necessity for change upon Mr. Thieu.

There might be some loss of face for him and even some political instability if he found it necessary to reverse himself now. But the tears now being shed in Washington and in the American Embassy in Saigon over the supposed risks for South Vietnam in these circumstances ignore the much greater risks involved in the present course. The non-election now under way guarantees instability later on—and perhaps much sooner. The worst course President Nixon can adopt is to keep walking hand-in-hand with Mr. Bunker and acting as if nothing serious has happened to alter the whole moral base for American involvement in Vietnam.