

NYTimes

# Last Chance in Vietnam

Two authoritative voices now have challenged the Administration's hand-wringing act over the political crisis in Vietnam and its claims that it has done all it can to influence President Thieu to turn his single-slate presidential "election" into a real contest.

The threat by Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington to vote against further economic or military aid to Saigon unless the Administration prevails upon General Thieu to hold a genuine election indicates the distress felt by long-time supporters of United States policy in Vietnam.

South Vietnam's Supreme Court and its National Assembly could constitutionally reopen the race to other candidates, if General Thieu requested action. The Nixon Administration, Senator Jackson said, "should stop pretending to be helpless, saying there is nothing more to be done." The United States, he added, "still has sufficient influence in Vietnam to see that a pointless referendum is transformed into a meaningful political contest—if necessary, at a later date."

This assertion has now been verified by none other than President Thieu himself in an interview given shortly before the Jackson statement but published fortuitously at about the same time. As reported by columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, South Vietnam's President said he could not stand up against an American threat to cut off aid. He disclosed that he had informed South Vietnam's generals that he would resign if the United States Government or Congress cut off aid because of his one-man race for re-election. "We need military assistance to conduct our self-defense," General Thieu said.

There have been other indications of concern within the military junta that rules South Vietnam. But none could be more conclusive than President Thieu's own revelation of the assurances of readiness to quit he felt it necessary to give his colleagues.

The Thieu and Jackson statements refute the Administration's denials of responsibility for the electoral farce now under way in Saigon. Mr. Nixon's failure to intervene to assure the people of South Vietnam an opportunity to choose their own government undermines the moral basis for claims by four American Presidents to justify intervention in Vietnam's civil war.

But Mr. Nixon is not the ultimate arbiter, as the Jackson and Thieu statements demonstrate. A firm position by Congress, making further aid conditional on a fair and contested presidential election in South Vietnam, undoubtedly would set such a contest in motion. What is essential is a three-way race including Vice President Ky and General Duong Van Minh, who is the candidate of the Buddhists and other major opposition forces in South Vietnam. Both Air Marshal Ky and General Minh undoubtedly would re-enter the campaign if adequate machinery for joint and impartial supervision of the election were established by mutual agreement.

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