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Vietnam's Shaky Politics

WASHINGTON — One year after Nguyen Van Thieu was elected president of South Vietnam, Saigon suddenly began bubbling like a boiling cauldron with rumors that a coup was afoot.

Although the reports had emanated in part from within Thieu's own staff, the South Vietnamese president took to the radio to announce that they were false. He obviously was deeply concerned about the ability of his regime to weather the storm.

SO WAS the United States, which already had invested so much of its manpower and material wealth in the battle to preserve South Vietnam's independence.

To make certain that all possible plotters against Thieu understood the American position, our ambassador in Saigon declared, "... Any deviations from the normal constitutional processes which the Vietnamese people have established for themselves would be a matter of the gravest concern. We cannot envisage a situation in which changes brought about by extralegal means could obtain the approval or support of the American people and government."

Those words were spoken by Ellsworth Bunker three years ago. Quite ironically, Bunker probably never dreamed that he one day would be confronted with a situation in which Thieu himself would resort to "deviations from the normal constitutional processes" to preserve his power.

Yet, that is what has happened.

Bunker now is confronted with putting the best possible face on the current political charade in South Vietnam.

Despite the cruel things that have been said about Lyndon Johnson by his detrac-

tors, he quite literally believed that the United States could help South Vietnam achieve political as well as economic and social reform — and thus assure its survival as a democratic, independent nation.

When Thieu took office, he promised that his administration would be guided by three principles: "democracy building, peace restoration and social improvement."

It is difficult at this point to assess his efforts to achieve peace and effect social improvement. But it is not difficult to realize that he has made a mockery of the first principle he enunciated four years ago.

Instead of embarking upon a mission of "democracy building," Thieu has thrown up every conceivable roadblock to prevent Ky and Gen. Duong Van Minh from challenging him in next month's presidential election.

The result is that Minh and Ky have refused to run. They have, in effect, refused to put a facade of respectability on Thieu's travesty. Ky has gone even further and threatened a coup against Thieu.

SO, HAVING already lost nearly 50,000 American boys, we once more are confronted with the possibility of a bloody and debilitating power struggle in Saigon while Washington watches benignly from the sidelines.

If President Nixon fails to act decisively to see that the right of self-determination is preserved in South Vietnam, that country could stumble blindly back into the kind of political chaos that existed after Kennedy sanctioned the fall of Diem. An act of omission can prove just as dangerous as an act of commission.