

## Inside Report

# An Interview With Thieu

By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

**SAIGON** — President Nguyen Van Thieu, while hesitant to stake his political life on a Gaullist-type referendum, has promised the army to resign if necessary to retain vital U.S. aid for South Vietnam's war effort.

"If I find that I am intolerable to the American government, I have no other choice but to resign," he told us in an exclusive interview at the presidential palace, his first in many months with a Western newsman.

**SPECIFICALLY**, Thieu revealed he has informed South Vietnamese generals he would quit if the U.S. Congress cuts off aid because of his one-man race for reelection.

Thieu also told us "I am thinking about" following the style of Charles de Gaulle and promising to resign unless he receives a previously fixed percentage of the vote in his unopposed election Oct. 3, but he seemed less than entranced with the idea.

He did hold the door open for an 11th hour constitutional change by the National Assembly to get some opponents on the Oct. 3 ballot after all, while refraining from a full presidential endorsement of that most difficult project.

He laughed off talk of a military coup against him and predicted failure for Communist military efforts to exploit crisis.

During the hour-long interview, Thieu

was far less ebullient than during our last talk with him here 18 months ago. Whereas in mid-1970 he was confident politically but worried about overly rapid U.S. troop withdrawals, he now has no doubts about Vietnamization but is obviously disturbed that political failure might undermine military success.

However, he seemed more deeply disturbed by American than South Vietnamese reactions to the withdrawal from the election of his two opponents, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and retired Gen. Duong Van Minh.

"I understand it created a little surprise in the United States," Thieu said wryly. "From far away, it is felt we should have many opponents."

Controlling his famous contempt for Ky, he labelled as "regrettable" his vice president's intemperate threats to bring down the government. While charging that Ky created "very bad speculation," Thieu told us he would take no legal action against him. Would Ky be permitted to live in Vietnam once his vice-presidential term ends? "Why not?" asked Thieu with a smile.

**THE PRESIDENT** predicted North Vietnam would greet the political turmoil with renewed military activity but said the Communists are too weak to succeed. Indeed, he forecast failing enemy military ventures until, somehow, serious negotiations begin, perhaps in 1973 or 1974.