

Generals Critique Thieu Aide

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SAIGON, Nov. 9—Five generals have written a letter to President Nguyen Van Thieu asking him to curb the growing influence of his talented and controversial political adviser, Hoang Duc Nha, according to reliable Vietnamese sources.

Nha is Thieu's right-hand man, and any move against him by army officers is seen by foreign diplomats here as a potentially thorny problem for the president.

So far, it is not clear what course Thieu will take.

Suave, handsome, American-educated and only 32 years old, Nha is a fascinating and often mysterious figure in the almost impenetrable swirl of Vietnamese politics. He reportedly writes important presidential speeches, dispenses advice, and sits in on Thieu's key meetings.

As commissioner of state for information, Nha is responsible for the nation's propaganda effort. He virtually controls the newspapers, radio and television, plus thousands of government political workers in the countryside.

The hundreds of bright yellow banners stretched across Saigon's boulevards exhorting the people to "defeat Communist aggression" and to "passionately participate in the program of increased production" are said to be Nha's work.

His political rise has been dazzling. In 1967, he returned home with a B.S. in electrical engineering from the University of Pittsburgh to set up a relatively unimportant technical assistance office for the government.

Now Nha is said to be the key figure in the president's efforts to make the presidential palace, rather than the various ministry offices, the center of power and decision-making.

He is Thieu's cousin, and the two men reportedly address one another as "younger brother" and "older brother" in private, indicating what Vietnamese observers call an amazing intimacy.

Western reporters, who a few years ago had relatively free access to Nha, now find that he seldom returns telephone calls.

The generals' main problem with Nha seems to stem from his youthful dynamism and brashness. For example, he calls the generals "friends" and "fellows" instead of more respectful forms of address, Vietnamese sources said.

High ranking officers who find themselves briefing Nha instead of Thieu are said to feel a sense of diminishing personal influence with the president.

"It basically comes down to a question of who has the king's ear," said one Western diplomat. "The generals are afraid Nha's influence will grow and ultimately they'll take orders from this young upstart who knows nothing about the military."

Thieu, who as a general himself participated in the plotting to overthrow the late President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, is said to be wary of the possibility of a military coup.

As a result, he has tried to make the military less political and has been blessed, during the past year or so, with an increasingly professional corps of officers who take less and less of a role in politics.

So it is considered unlikely that Thieu will simply brush aside the generals' letter, especially since the generals are widely respected and powerful professionals, including Gen. Cao Van Vien, officially the top military man in the country as chairman of the joint general staff, and Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, commander of Military Region 1, and the man said to have saved the northern part of the country during the spring, 1972 offensive.

Two others who reportedly signed the letter are Lt. Gen. Tran Van Trung, chief of Vietnam's General Political Warfare department, and Maj. Gen. Cao Hao Hon, deputy minister of defense.

The letter reportedly told of dissatisfaction among military men with Nha, and drew a comparison with dissatisfaction in the early 1960s with President Diem's brother and closest adviser, Ngo Dinh Nhu, a feeling that contributed to Diem's overthrow.