

# Mr. Thieu Tells His Side of It

By Tom Wicker

President Thieu's emotional speech of resignation is, of course, only one version of events, and that of a man who obviously has much need to justify himself. Even so, it seems at first reading to support a few observations:

First, the resignation comes several weeks too late to offer much hope that anything more than the terms of a complete North Vietnamese takeover can be negotiated. This may be judgment enough on Mr. Thieu's professions of selfless patriotism.

By his own admission, the withdrawals he ordered from the Central Highlands failed in their strategic purpose. Then the withdrawal became a rout leading to the collapse of the South Vietnamese Army. If he had stepped down then, as the situation plainly required, and allowed formation of a government of national unity, that government might still have used its control of a vast majority of the South Vietnamese people and its most productive land to negotiate something like the orderly "national reconciliation" envisioned in the 1973 accords.

Despite his references to North Vietnamese violations of those accords, moreover, the Thieu speech makes it implicitly clear that the Saigon Government made little effort to carry out those accords, either. Now that his army has been overrun, Mr. Thieu cries out for "immediate, unconditional negotiations"—but after the 1973 accords were signed, when the machinery had been established, he no more than Hanoi, wanted or was willing to engage in "immediate, unconditional negotiations." Instead, both sought to improve their military positions and territorial control—with Mr. Thieu having an initial advantage due

to massive American military aid shipped *before* the accords were signed.

Even so, this was a fateful piece of shortsightedness on the part of Saigon. As Mr. Thieu's speech pointed out, the accords permitted North Vietnamese forces to remain in the South—a long-run advantage the Saigon Government could hardly hope to overcome, having already been unable to do so even when it had the aid of 500,000 American troops and unlimited American firepower. Negotiations *then*, entered in good faith and with a view to genuine national reconciliation, could hardly have yielded South Vietnam a worse fate than Mr. Thieu's war policy did—and might well have produced a much happier result.

But if Mr. Thieu's account is to be believed, President Nixon gave him at that point a "solid pledge"—it is not clear from the speech whether Mr. Thieu meant in writing or verbally—"that when and if North Vietnam renewed its aggression against South Vietnam, the United States would actively and strongly intervene." This "solid pledge" was in the context of "com[ing] back in force to help directly, not just Vietnamization," as Mr. Thieu recounted it.

If Mr. Nixon indeed made such a "solid pledge"—and more than Mr. Thieu's speech is needed to establish the truth of the Thieu-Nixon exchanges—it was improper or impolitic on at least three counts. It was secretly made, when Congress and the American people were being assured there were no secret codicils or addenda to the Paris accords. And however Mr. Nixon conceived his powers as Commander in Chief, he had no political authority to make such a pledge and could have had little legitimate expectation that a Democratic Congress or a war-sick people would support it if and when it had to be disclosed and made good.

Third, and perhaps more serious, if such a pledge was made, it was bound to have had the effect of underwriting Mr. Thieu's policy of ignoring the American-sponsored peace agreement while continuing hostilities. If he was guaranteed American military intervention anytime North Vietnam "renewed its aggression," he was virtually guaranteed his security. Why should he enter a negotiation that if honesty pursued could only lead to compromise with Hanoi and his own departure from power?

Mr. Thieu also went into some detail about what he called a draft peace proposal that he said he had rejected for three reasons—that it called for a coalition government, termed North and South Vietnam one state, and accepted North Vietnamese troops in the South.

Mr. Thieu said he "told the Americans" that if he accepted such an agreement (which probably could have been had at almost any time during the war), "I would be a traitor to my country." He said he had been confronted with this draft agreement on Oct. 26, 1972—which is the day Henry Kissinger announced in Washington that "peace is at hand."

That was just a week before the Presidential election of 1972. And while Mr. Thieu's description of the "draft" agreement may be self-serving, it does tend to confirm that it was not Hanoi that reneged but Saigon that at first refused to accept the agreements negotiated by Mr. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. That is almost entirely contrary to the official version given the American people who were told that Hanoi had to be forced to keep its word by the so-called "carpet bombing" of Christmas, 1972.

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