

Asylum for Thieu?

There have been reports that Nguyen Van Thieu, until a few days ago the President of South Vietnam, would like to settle in the United States. In the light of all that has happened since he assumed power with our blessing eight years ago, we have some obligation to extend him the hospitality of our large house. It is conceivable that he has already been invited and that arrangements for his arrival are even now in train. But if a decision on this score has yet to be made, there are some blinking yellow lights which we should heed.

Thieu will leave Vietnam a bitter, angry man. His resignation speech was sprinkled liberally with vitriol, most of it directed toward America and Americans. Obviously, he expected more support, moral and material, than he received during the last six critical months. Perhaps he genuinely believed that the United States would increase its military assistance and even resume its bombing of North Vietnam in the face of Hanoi's overt invasion. And it may be that he was encouraged in such a belief by American officials in Saigon or Washington.

And so, although Thieu's speech was intemperate and insulting, we cannot condemn it out of hand. In any case, a decision whether or not to offer Thieu asylum should not hang on the style and content of this last diatribe; the United States is too mature to be guided by that, and the issue is too complex to be disposed of so easily.

The most important task the administration and the rest of us face over the next difficult year or so is to strive to heal the scars of the traumatic American experience in Vietnam. The problem of Thieu must be examined in terms of how he would affect the healing process.

Thieu's presence in the United States can only serve to open wounds, to inflame the sores. He cannot help giving aid to those who lust for ideological plunder or personal advantage from the debacle in Vietnam. Thieu knows nothing about the United States and less than nothing about American politics. He would be a vulnerable target for the radical left which will hound him if only to embarrass the administration. And he would be a patsy for exploitation by the right.

Presidential aspirants are already warming up their campaign rhetoric and trying out what they hope will be promising themes. Some—

George Wallace in particular—are testing out the who-lost-Vietnam?—angle. Nguyen Van Thieu would come on the scene at a strategic time for hucksters and jingoists. He would add drama to their quest for the loser of Vietnam. And in their zeal to point their finger at some politically or ideologically more rewarding target, the Wallaces and Reverend Moons will obviously ignore the fact that the man they are looking for is Thieu himself.

It would be an awful capstone to a terrible decade if the fifes and drums of our bicentennial celebra-

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tion were drowned out by the caterwauling of a national witch hunt. And if we were to cast about for a catalyst to divide the United States at a time when unity was urgently needed, Nguyn Van Thieu could well be our man. But who needs this?

We have had some lessons here. Mrs. Chiang Kai-shek has taken advantage of American hospitality on more than one occasion to fan the smoldering zeal of the mischievous "China lobby." And Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu spread venom and dissension wherever she went during her visit here a decade or so ago. Thieu could present an even more difficult problem. He would arrive at a moment when the emotional content of the Vietnam post-mortems would still be high; he would reside here, bitter, frustrated, even revengeful. It would be better now to work out some alternative than to present this or the next administration with the awkward problem of digesting Thieu.

There are other, possibly more congenial places than the United States for Thieu to reconstruct his shattered life. He is reported to be a wealthy man and, unlike the vast majority of Vietnamese refugees, could live comfortably in other countries of Asia (Indonesia, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore). Switzerland offers another possibility.

A rush of compassion for homeless Vietnamese orphans and for expatriated Vietnamese friends and ex-employees is understandable and indicated. In the special case of ex-President Thieu, however, compassion must be seasoned with caution.