

Echoes of 1968

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President Thieu's grudging prediction that there may soon be a cease-fire in Indochina reinforces speculation that Washington and Hanoi are close to agreement on terms for a cessation of hostilities. But the South Vietnamese leader has made clear that he will do all in his power to block a political settlement, again sharply rejecting any coalition with the Communists and setting conditions for a cease-fire that may not be attainable.

General Thieu's tough statement recalls the eve of another American Presidential election four years ago when another national Administration was striving to redeem a broken campaign promise through a last-minute push for peace. President Johnson had ordered a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam (over Thieu's vociferous objections) and, after consultations with Saigon, had arranged to initiate negotiations in Paris. Three days before the election, President Thieu abruptly announced that his Government would boycott the talks.

The South Vietnamese President's action was a blow not only to President Johnson's peace efforts but to the Democratic Presidential contender, Hubert Humphrey, as well. It was seen as a bid by General Thieu to delay negotiations in the hope that a Nixon victory would lead to a stiffer United States stance on settlement terms.

For nearly four years, the Nixon Administration has supported the Saigon regime's uncompromising position with American lives, material and money at incalculable cost to the peoples of Indochina. Now, with another election at hand, Mr. Nixon appears at last to be moving toward the kind of settlement that President Johnson might have achieved four years ago, but for Saigon's intransigence. Once again, President Thieu is attempting to cast his veto.

President Nixon is confronted with an inescapable choice between his oft-repeated commitment to Saigon to bar a Communist takeover in South Vietnam and his unfulfilled promise to the American people to deliver peace in Indochina. He cannot have it both ways, as President Thieu has bluntly made clear.