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Getting Thieu in Line

HISTORY never repeats itself precisely, but there are interesting and ironic similarities between the approaching end of the war in Vietnam and the efforts to achieve peace in Korea nearly two decades ago.

The sharpest of these similarities is the way, now as then, the United States was effectively compelled to exert pressure on its ally in order to induce the enemy to compromise. Or, to put it more bluntly, the United States eventually perceived in both cases that it finally had to run the risk of toppling the client it had supported for years if it could ever hope to reach a settlement.

This phenomenon reflects the nature of the two wars, and the divergent objectives of the United States and its proteges in the two situations.

Putting their ambitious oratory aside, the U.S. leaders essentially recognized during both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts that they were waging limited conflicts.

THIS WAS apparent when President Truman dismissed Gen. Douglas MacArthur for trying to escalate the Korean War into China. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon also came to realize that they could not force an unconditional surrender on the Communists, and had therefore to parallel their Vietnam military operations with negotiating offers.

Both in Korea and again in Vietnam, the Communists also recognized ultimately that they could not win total victory, at least on the battlefield. In the face of colossal American power they had to acknowledge that they could only fight to a stalemate.

But President Syngman Rhee in Korea and now South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu viewed their struggles from a different angle. They were convinced, rightly or wrongly, that they were fighting for sheer survival, and that anything less than a triumph would signify defeat. Henry Kissinger articulated Thieu's dilemma when he

wrote in Foreign Affairs more than two years ago: "The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win."

So it was natural that Rhee should dig in his heels as the chance for a real peace emerged in Korea in 1953. And Thieu may do the same as the current movement toward a Vietnam settlement unfolds.

Rhee blatantly attempted to sabotage the Korean truce by torpedoing a U.S. agreement with the Communists on war prisoners. Despite hostility from right wing senators like Ralph Flanders and Styles Bridges, President Eisenhower presented Rhee with an ultimatum.

Unless he behaved, Ike flatly told Rhee, the United States could not "continue to operate jointly with you" and "it will be necessary to effect another arrangement." This meant, in plainer language, that Eisenhower was prepared to scuttle Rhee.

THIEU is displaying comparable signs of recalcitrance. Earlier this week, for example, he asserted that he would not concede to a cease-fire unless the Hanoi legions in South Vietnam were pulled back to the North. He has also been assailing the provisional council agreed upon by Kissinger and the Communists as an unacceptable coalition.

In his Thursday press conference, however, Kissinger made it clear that Thieu would have to go along if he hopes to get along. He is "convinced," Kissinger said, that Thieu "will" accept a cease-fire. And, although he cautioned the Communists that "we will not be stampeded into an agreement," he also warned Thieu that "we will not be deflected from an agreement when its provisions are right."

The big question for the future, however, is what action the Nixon administration would or could take in the event that Thieu tries to undermine an accord.

Thieu will have ample opportunities for sabotage even if he does accede to the first phase of the agreement. His troops in remote parts of Vietnam can

violate the cease-fire. His sympathizers on the proposed election commission can paralyze progress by exercising their right of veto. He can refuse to release the numbers of South Vietnamese captives in his jails, and thereby complicate the prisoner issue to be negotiated between his government and the Vietcong.

In the face of those potential pitfalls, it remains to be seen whether President Nixon will emulate Eisenhower's courage and threaten Thieu. For that reason, among others, the months ahead are bound to test Mr. Nixon's guts.