

# Thieu's Trump Card: Weakness of His Hand

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Special to The New York Times

PARIS, Nov. 6—The North Vietnamese have professed not to believe that the United States is seriously concerned about Saigon's objections to the cease-fire agreement negotiated by Henry A. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's representative.

But President Nguyen Van Thieu does, in fact,

**News Analysis** have a real trump to play. His power is precisely the power of weakness, of South Vietnam's dependence on the United States for the "chance of survival" that President Nixon and two Presidents before him pledged repeatedly.

As a former United States official who is a veteran of Vietnam policy planning put it, "The American public just doesn't realize the enormous leverage Thieu has, especially in the period just before our elections."

"The U.S. Government has an obsessive fear that if we push too hard, the whole thing can collapse on us," he said.

**'Peace With Honor' at Stake**

Mr. Thieu, according to this official, "is probably telling the U. S. in private, as he did in 1963 when negotiations were starting, 'if you insist, gentlemen, I will take no responsibility for what happens.'"

"There may be pants, rout, and you will have a Dunkirk situation trying to get your men out," he went on. "That is up to you."

It is evident, as Hanoi keeps pointing out, that the United

States could simply threaten to cut off all aid to Mr. Thieu and that he would then be forced to accept the deal Washington has made or expect to be ousted.

But it is also evident to United States and Saigon officials that such a threat would probably boomerang on the United States by exploding any semblance of a "peace with honor."

If the war were to be ended in chaos and visible disintegration of the South Vietnamese Government, it would be hard for the United States to avoid the label of "surrender," which President Nixon has said, he will never accept, and even harder to justify having kept the fighting going for so long.

That nightmare has haunted Washington policy officials ever since 1963, when the United States sanctioned the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem. The aftermath of the coup against him was 18 months of revolving-door governments.

## Foe's Victory Was Near

The Saigon administration's hold on South Vietnam was so gravely weakened that in less than two years, North Vietnam was within reach of a military victory. It took bombing of the North and eventually half a million American soldiers to prevent defeat.

It is not a situation that Washington would care to confront again. Mr. Thieu knows that, and the knowledge is his strength. Now, however, Washington has abandoned long-cherished hopes for defeat of the Communist forces and victory by Saigon. Washington has agreed to settle for a compromise that would convert the war into a political struggle. With luck, that could go on for several years before one side emerged dominant. With a miracle, Saigon might even win.

But President Thieu is a shrewd and extremely cautious man. He consults astrologers, has a string of fortune-tellers, and does everything he can to avoid relying on luck.

Essentially, he would prefer even now to keep trying for a military victory and refuse the risk of any compromise. Mr. Kissinger apparently convinced him that the United States simply would not continue to support that policy and that some compromise was inevitable.

The rushed military aid program to South Vietnam before a cease-fire and the effort to

improve terms of the agreement with Hanoi are aimed at convincing Mr. Thieu that his chances are better than he seems to think.

That is the carrot that the United States is giving Saigon, because its own rhetoric over a decade makes it fear the danger of using a stick. Mr. Thieu could not resist a determined Washington set on getting the United States out of the war.

The United States, no longer so worried about Communism in Southeast Asia, now that it is improving relations with Moscow and Peking, nonetheless cannot resist Mr. Thieu's warning of collapse if he is pressed too harshly.

That is the minuet of power currently linking Washington and Saigon, a dance in which strength is muscle-bound and weakness the defiant menace.

The outcome remains to be seen. Mr. Thieu's major disadvantage is the war-weariness of his people and the effects that the glimpse of a coming peace must have on their willingness to go on killing and dying. Washington now seems content to let time work on South Vietnam's tough and wily President a little longer.

Without firm American backing, he would almost certainly fall. But without him the United States Administration sees no orderly, seemly way to leave Vietnam. That is the dilemma.