



Laurence Stern

# Thieu's Top Emissary

PRESIDENT Nguyen Van Thieu has sent the equivalent of his Bob Haldeman to Paris to consult with the South Vietnamese negotiating team on the next round of cease-fire talks.

The name of the emissary is Hoang Duc Nha, Thieu's most influential personal adviser on the entire range of military, political and diplomatic problems that confront the Saigon regime.

Official negotiation-watchers in Washington say the dispatch of Nha from Saigon to Paris could well signal the fact that a crucial stage of diplomacy has been

reached for the Thieu Government.

Nha is South Vietnam's chief Americanologist. He is a voracious reader of the American press and had been a student in the University of Oklahoma, a fact that he brags qualifies him as an expert on "Middle America."

IN SAIGON he is the only Palace intimate to whom Thieu entrusts the role of defining South Vietnamese policy to the foreign as well as domestic press. Nha's office, one floor over Thieu's in the presidential palace, is a storehouse of telephone and intercom circuits, one of which is a hot line to the president's desk.

Nha is authoritatively reported to be the only civilian in the South Vietnamese government who regularly attends meetings of South Vietnam's national security council and has complete access to Thieu's Situation Room.

The closeness of his relationship to the president has, in fact, become a matter of annoyance to top members of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (our Joint Chiefs of Staff, to heads of ministries and to important members of Saigon's diplomatic establishment.

He is young (just over 30) speaks French and English with bilingual skill, and publishes a newspaper, Tin Song, which has come to be regarded as the mouthpiece of the Thieu government on all major questions of policy.

Last July, in an interview with The Washington Post, Nha delivered the official position of his government on the then-impending but still uncertain prospect of cease-fire negotiations. It was a remarkably prophetic scenario for the course taken by Thieu in Paris.

"It is one thing to accept a cease-fire," said Nha at the time. "It is another to accept the modalities of a to argue, argue and push, push. By the end of the year, perhaps, we will be in Quangtri and we will be in a much stronger position than we are now."

In an allusion to the diversionary debate in 1968 over the shape of the Paris negotiating table, Nha acknowledged that the current round of talks could well turn into a debate over a "round cease-fire versus a square cease-fire." He has a keen eye for historical analogies and ironies.

IN SAIGON last July the crucial question was how firmly the Nixon administration would adhere to its commitment to survival of the Thieu government, notwithstanding the oncoming election and the American quest for total disengagement from the Vietnam conflict.

And at that time the most unsettling figure of all the Americans involved in the negotiating process, from the standpoint of the Palace, was Henry Kissinger. "Kissinger," said Nha at the time, "is like Richelieu. He has brains—fantastic brains. But you wonder if he has a heart."

Unquestionably, Nha's role in Paris is to further the South Vietnamese strategy of "argue, argue—push, push." He believes that South Vietnam can reach a point, with the massive, last-minute infusion of American arms, at which it will be able to destroy the remnants of North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front cadre.

"The Communists know that if they want to destroy the South Vietnamese Army they first must eliminate President Thieu," he said in the course of our interview.

"As things are, with President Thieu in power, they are afraid of an Indonesian-style coup even in a coalition. They are afraid we would cut their throats."

Nha is no mere messenger boy.

Hobart Rowen is on a brief vacation. His column will resume on his return.