

# No Thieu coup expected at least until next fall

WASHINGTON — Even under circumstances described at high levels here as “the worst possible case,” South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu is now believed virtually invulnerable to military defeat or political overthrow at least until next fall and possibly much longer.

That judgment has been strongly fortified on the military front by the failure of Hanoi’s estimated 145,000 front-line troops now in South Vietnam to pull off anything like the last-minute military breakthroughs Hanoi had been hoping for.

Thus, Hanoi and the National Liberation Front had made fairly elaborate plans to interdict strategic highways connecting Saigon and the delta to the south and Saigon and provincial capitals to the west and north. Although some of these last-minute military operations succeeded, they fell short of the target.

## Thieu’s superiority overwhelming

In brief, while Thieu has lost some hamlets in the fighting that bracketed the cease-fire—and probably will gain and lose some more in the fighting that is sure to continue—his military superiority is overwhelming.

This military judgment is fortified by other factors. For example, American forces, in diminishing strength, will be on the scene for almost two more months. It is ludicrous to think that Hanoi would try to augment its present force in the south while American troops are still in South Vietnam.

At the end of that 60-day period, the rainy season will be starting in the north-western regions of South Vietnam and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail—traditional port of entry from North Vietnam to the south.

## No evidence of Hanoi plan

Even if Hanoi should decide, in total violation of the cease-fire agreement, to begin re-equipping its forces still in South Vietnam, the rainy season plus American interdiction from the air over Laos would doom the effort. Moreover, there is no evidence so far that Hanoi has any such plan.

That short-term military judgment, however, is tempered by one condition: Thieu’s willingness to use his vast army, and his army’s willingness to be used, to exploit his superiority over an enemy which for the first time is cut off from its rear area (a liability that should prove far graver to Hanoi than Thieu’s own post-cease-fire liability—the loss of U.S. air power).

During last summer’s vicious battles, following Hanoi’s spring invasion across the demilitarized zone, Thieu husbanded his military strength. The degree to which he refused to commit front-line battalions is a matter of dispute here, but some highly-

## Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

placed strategists believe he could have committed at least one extra full division against the Communists in the highlands region, known as II Corps.

## Battalions in reserve

Likewise, Thieu kept other battalions in reserve during last summer’s warfare in the delta and elsewhere. He did this despite specific contrary advice from Gen. Alexander Haig, then Henry Kissinger’s top assistant (and now the Army’s vice chief of staff). On his visit to Saigon last June, Haig told Thieu that a cease-fire acceptable to President Nixon might be arranged anytime in the next six months, and that he should use the intervening time to clear out areas controlled by the Communists.

That advice was repeated by Kissinger himself during Kissinger’s August visit to Saigon. Thieu seemed reluctant, choosing instead to safeguard a substantial part of his force for the cease-fire period.

Now that that period has arrived, it is President Nixon’s fervent hope that Thieu “will make the cease-fire work for him” by committing his forces to the full extent needed.

## Thieu’s political future

Thieu’s political future, as viewed here, is somewhat less predictable. A major reason is fear that he may overplay his internal-security hand and stimulate an anti-Thieu reaction which, while anything but pro-Communist, could be exploited by the Communists to create political chaos.

But in the words of one close observer of Thieu, if he can exchange his “mandarin tendencies” of aloofness and remoteness for open political activity, he should be able to convert his narrow base of power into genuine political support.