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TRAN NGOC CHAU
No more politics

Saigon Frees A Critic Of Thieu

Saigon

The Saigon government on Wednesday released from prison Tran Ngoc Chau, a once-intrepid critic of President Nguyen Van Thieu, on the understanding that he would not engage in political activities, well-placed sources said yesterday.

Chau, an architect of the American-financed pacification program and a staunch anti-Communist, was arrested four years ago on charges of "treasonous relations with the Communists."

But, according to close observers at the time, Chau was caught in a web of positions and convictions that put him in direct conflict with Thieu when the American disengagement from Vietnam was unsettling the political scene.

According to some informed Vietnamese, the timing of Chau's release was aimed at the American Congress, which is considering aid to Vietnam and which is again unsettling the political scene by its apparent willingness to cut appropriations requested by the Nixon administration.

Earlier this year, during the prisoner exchanges between Saigon and the Viet Cong, Chau was flown to the Communist administrative center of Loc Ninh, ostensibly to be turned over to the other side as a "spy." But he refused to go and, later back in Saigon, refused to accept "returnee" status, which would require repenting for his Communist activities and returning to the government fold.

Informed sources said that in return for his agreement to stay out of politics Chau was freed without having to be declared a "returnee."

Chau was sentenced in March, 1970, to ten years' imprisonment and hard labor by a military field court after he had been stripped of his parliamentary immunity by a series of maneuvers.

Formally, Chau was accused of having held a series of meetings with his older brother, Tran Ngoc Hien, a high-ranking North Vietnamese intelligence officer. Chau conceded that he had had eight such meetings between 1965 and 1969, but said that he had been encouraged to continue them by John Paul Vann, the late American pacification adviser.

Between 1968 and 1969, Chau, who had been close to Thieu before he became president, began advocating peace talks among Hanoi, Saigon and the Viet Cong — without the Americans.

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