

Chapter XVIII

The false dominance of Nguyen Van Thieu

Civil War against the French

Vietnam fiercely resisted the Chinese occupation that made the country a colony of China for over a thousand years from 111 BCE until the tenth century CE. In the 13th century the Vietnamese thrice repulsed Khubilai Khan, pioneering methods of guerrilla warfare later effectively used against the French and the Americans. Although the Vietnamese had often fiercely resisted French colonialism in the 19th century, French colonisation transformed the economy and society, promoting an urban elite.

Nguyen Ai Quoc, later known as Ho Chi Minh, had left Vietnam in 1912 as a cabin boy on a merchant steamer and settled in France with a colony of Vietnamese nationalists. Rebuffed at the peace settlements at the end of World War I when he attempted to represent Vietnamese nationalism, he joined the French Communist Party and turned to the Comintern for support after Lenin proposed an anti-colonial communism. Ho subsequently worked for more than two decades as a Party organiser in the Soviet Union, China, Thailand and Vietnam, organising the Indochinese Communist Party from 1930.¹

The French meanwhile continued to ferociously repress rebellions in Indochina including communist insurgencies.² Ho returned to Japanese-occupied Vietnam in 1941 and formed the Viet Minh to fight the Japanese. On 2 September 1945 he declared independence of Vietnam from French rule with words borrowed from Thomas Jefferson, US Army officers on the

¹ G. Herring, America's Longest War, N.Y. 1996, p.5.

² Herring, p.4.

reviewing stand, and as United States warplanes performed a flyover while a Vietnamese band played “The Star-Spangled Banner.”³

After the Second World War the United States was encouraging the European colonial powers to divest themselves of their colonies and Vietnamese nationalists were keen to enlist their anti-colonial support, but France soon persuaded the United States to support France’s continued claims to colonial dominance of Indochina in return for French global support against the Soviet Union in the developing Cold War. After the French had returned, Ho turned to the USSR for support. In September 1945 he proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which was recognized by the Soviet Union and by China.

Especially after the communist victory in the civil war in China, the United States came to view Southeast Asia as yet another arena in which it was competing with the Soviet Union for geopolitical dominance. Communist movements in Asia had been so encouraged by the Chinese success that in May 1950, Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson drew attention to “the urgency of the situation applying in the associated states of Viet-Nam, Laos and Cambodia”, and announced military assistance for anti-communist regimes in the area.⁴

In 1949, the French-imposed Emperor Bao Dai had signed an agreement with France for Vietnam to continue as an Associated State, with France controlling finances and defence. Bao Dai chose Ngo Dinh Diem, who had been Interior Minister in Annam in 1933, but had resigned because the French would not give Vietnamese a greater say in their affairs, as Prime Minister.⁵

Civil war continued in Vietnam against the French reoccupation, although in 1953 France granted full independence to Laos as member of the French Union, and Cambodian Prince

³ Herring, p.3.

⁴ Statement by the Acting Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, 11 May 1950, in Pentagon Papers; the Defence Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam, Seator Gravel Edition, Boston, 1971-2, Vol I, p.42.

⁵ D. Warner, The Last Confucian; Vietnam, Southeast Asia and the West, New York, 1963, pp.84, 85.

Sihanouk took control of the army and declared Cambodia's independence from France. In May 1954, the Vietnamese Communists defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, ending the civil war. In July, agreements reached at Geneva called for cessation of hostilities across Indochina. Provisional demarcation at the 17th parallel divided Vietnam, pending political settlement to be reached by nationwide elections. French forces withdrew from Hanoi in October, and American advisors replaced French trainers of the southern army.

United States President Dwight Eisenhower began a crash program of assistance to South Vietnam. Eisenhower set explicit conditions for supporting a Saigon leader in April 1955, but when he supported the government with those benchmarks unmet, the United States lost credibility that could have subsequently constrained southern political behaviour.⁶ The Ngo Diem government subsequently refused to negotiate with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) on elections for reunification as Viet Minh leaders seemed certain to win, and US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles supported Prime Minister Diem's position. A fraudulent referendum established a republic in the south with 98.2% favouring replacement of Emperor Bao Dai by Diem as head of state.

In October 1955 the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was proclaimed with Diem as president. However, Diem's political regime was soon confronted by Viet Minh agents who had stayed in the south after the Geneva conference specifically to destabilize his regime, and insurrection of armed religious sects. The CIA attempted to assist Diem's regime achieve legitimacy by buying off or intimidating his opponents, and Edward Lansdale of the CIA helped resettle at least 600,000 North Vietnamese Catholics to help build a constituency for Diem in the south.⁷

⁶ J. Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, Kansas, 2009, p.50.

⁷ J. Fisher, "The Second Catholic President: Ngo Dinh Diem, John F. Kennedy and the Vietnam Lobby, 1954-1963", *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Vol.15, No.3, Summer 1997, p124.

Meanwhile, thanks to Mao Zedong, massive land reform programs had begun in the north with landlords tried before ‘people’s tribunals’.⁸ The Tenth Plenum of the Vietnam Workers’ Party Central Committee forecast a “long arduous, complicated struggle for unification.” In December 1956, the Political Bureau told Southern cadres to persist with ‘political struggle’ while preparing for ‘self-defence’ and ‘armed propaganda’.⁹

Nguyen Van Thieu

Nguyen Van Thieu was born the youngest of five children on 5 April 1923 in the village of Tri Thuy, Ninh Thuan province. His father, a small landowner and sometime fisherman sent his oldest son to France for legal training, and Thieu himself to a Catholic school in Hue.¹⁰ Thieu joined the Viet Minh in 1945 to fight against the French and became a youth leader and district chief. He later claimed that he only discovered that the Viet Minh was directed by communists after a few months.¹¹

With assistance from his brother Nguyen Van Hieu, he then joined the Merchant Marine but turned down a berth on ship as an officer when he discovered that Vietnamese were paid less than French. In 1948 he was admitted into the first officer class of the National Military Academy in Hue. He received advanced training at the French infantry school and was commissioned as a Lieutenant. Benefitting from belated French attempts to promote indigenous officers, he made a successful early career in the French-sponsored Vietnam Military Army and married the daughter of a prosperous practitioner of indigenous medicine, Nguyen Thi Mai Anh, a Roman Catholic, to which religion of the political elite he converted to ensure his advancement

⁸ Chang & Halliday, pp.435-436.

⁹ W. Turley, *The Second Indochina War, a concise political and military history*, Latham etc., 2009, p.xxii.

¹⁰ Prados, p.343.

¹¹ *Nguyen Van Thieu, President of the Republic of Vietnam, Saigon?*, 1969?, p.2.

under Diem's presidency.¹²

Nguyen Van Thieu was selected for the first class of the new Vietnamese National Army (VNA) General Staff course at Hanoi and became operations staff officer for the key Hung Yen sector in the Tonkin delta.¹³ As major he took command of a VNA battalion in central Vietnam. As the VNA expanded, he briefly commanded the First Infantry Division while functioning as deputy to the commander of First Corps, and later acted as Chief of Staff of the Field Command.¹⁴ At the time of Dien Bien Phu he participated in Operation *Atlante* in central Vietnam.¹⁵

He attracted attention of American military advisors and attended the United States' Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, and the Joint and Combined Planning School in Okinawa. In 1956, he was appointed Superintendent of the National Military Academy in Dalat by the Diem family.¹⁶ During his four years in command there he made many later useful connections. He was a Lieutenant Colonel when the Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed after withdrawal of French forces in 1955. In 1961 Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu was made Commander of the First Infantry Division. In September 1962 he was assigned command of the Fifth Infantry Division. By 1964, he was a Major-General commanding the Fourth Army Corps.¹⁷

The Republic of Vietnam

Diem's Catholicism was strongly coloured by a pervasive Confucianism that predicated

¹² F. FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, N.Y., 1992, p.242.

¹³ Prados, p.343.

¹⁴ Prados, p.343.

¹⁵ Nguyen Van Thieu, p.5.

¹⁶ Obituary, The New York Times, 1 October, 2001, p.A20.

¹⁷ Nguyen Van Thieu, p.6.

increasing autocracy.¹⁸ By late 1955 he had consolidated his political dominance in the south and called for a referendum to be exclusively held there, and in October he declared himself President of the Republic of Vietnam. However, as he wouldn't delegate and he repressed opposition with a security force controlled by his corrupt and authoritarian brother Ngo Dinh Nhu he soon began to alienate his supporters. For example, abolishing elected village councils and replacing them with appointed northerners.¹⁹

Nhu controlled an extensive system of extortion, payoffs and influence-peddling through a secret elitist political organisation, Can Lao. Some opposed Diem simply because he was a Roman Catholic and 80% of the population were nominally Buddhist. Assisted by this disaffection, the Communists began a campaign of assassination and terror against government officials and recruited many others alienated by corruption of local officials to obtain political dominance.

Diem had many supporters in the United States including then Senator John F. Kennedy, who on 1 June 1956 insisted that, "Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia."²⁰ Kennedy opposed French ambitions to retain Vietnam as a colony, despite American policy.²¹ However, he subscribed to the Domino Theory that suggested that Burma, Thailand, India, Japan, the Philippines, Laos and Cambodia would be threatened if Vietnam fell to communism.²² In May 1957 Diem visited the United States where he addressed a joint session of Congress, his autocratic manner alienating many of his American supporters not already

¹⁸ Warner, pp. 87, 88, 91, 107-124.

¹⁹ Lam Quang Thi, The Twenty-five Year Century: A South Vietnamese General remembers the Indochina War to the Fall of Saigon, Denton, 2001, p.92.

²⁰ Senator J. Kennedy, "America's Stake in Vietnam", in A Symposium on America's Stake in Vietnam, New York, 1956, p.10.

²¹ A. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House, Boston, 1965, p.320. Kennedy, p.13.

²² Kennedy, p.10.

disenchanted by his continued failure to institute democratic reforms.²³

In November 1957 the Royal Lao government and the Pathet Lao agreed to form a coalition government and integrate their armed forces. However, in July the next year US-supported rightist elements forced Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma to resign. In January 1959 the 15th Plenum of the Central Committee of the DRV approved limited armed struggle in the South. Southern communist cadres formed their first battalion-sized armed force, and insurgent activity began in the south from October 1957.

The Diem government set up military tribunals to penalise involvement with the revolutionary movement. In January 1960 concerted uprisings across Ben Tre province spread across the Mekong delta and Communist forces attacked the ARVN Fifth Regiment near Tay Ninh. Diem permitted a National Assembly election that was even more brazenly rigged than that of 1956.²⁴ The ARVN responded with an attempted but badly planned coup. The army was divided, and LtCol Nguyen Van Thieu initially expressed support for the plotters, but eventually responded to directives from the presidential palace.²⁵

Meanwhile, the DRV imposed universal conscription. The National Liberation Front (NLF) was instituted with southern revolutionary armed forces forming the Peoples' Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), dubbed 'Vietcong' by the Saigon regime. Ambushes and attacks on government officials escalated. In August, a neutralist military coup restored Souvanna Phouma to power in Vientiane but the rightists counterattacked, supported by the CIA, and Laos collapsed into civil war.

In November, John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States by 100,881 votes,

²³ Fisher, p.133.

²⁴ Prados, p.60.

²⁵ Prados, p.61.

or one tenth of a percent of the vote, over Vice-President Richard Nixon. Outgoing President Eisenhower warned Kennedy that Laos had become the United States' major foreign policy problem, and that if the United States allowed Laos to fall to communism the whole area would succumb.²⁶ Despite this presentiment, the CIA then assessed that there was then no significant communist threat to the rest of Southeast Asia, other than from accommodation or neutrality of neighbouring regimes if countries in Indochina fell to communism.²⁷

In May 1961 a ceasefire in Laos preceded a conference in Geneva to restore the neutral coalition government, which was eventually achieved in July 1962. Also in May U.S. Vice-President Lyndon Baines Johnson visited South Vietnam. Presidential advisors Walt Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor then visited in October and concluded that the South was losing the war. On their return to Washington they drew up plans for enhanced assistance disguised as flood relief. President Kennedy rejected the idea but decided to offer Diem enhanced logistic support. The United States began to provide enhanced military aid, with the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) taking over responsibility for training the ARVN. In February 1962 General Paul Harkins was appointed to head the reorganised military aid mission and in May the Kennedy administration despatched troops to Thailand.

The Diem government attempted a Strategic Hamlet Program as an emulation of the villagization program used against the communist insurgency in Malaya from 1948 to 1960, but the strategy was less effective in Vietnam as there was difficulty differentiating ethnically identical NLF agents from the general populace. The Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States continued to threaten global peace, and in October President Kennedy was

²⁶ C. Clifford, "Viet Nam Reappraisal", in *Foreign Affairs*, June 1969, p.604.

²⁷ SNIE 50-61: Outlook in Mainland Southeast Asia," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63*, 23, pp.59-60, quoted in G. Porter, *Perils of Imbalance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, Berkely, 2005, pp.238

challenged by the Cuban missile crisis. While DRV troops' infiltration of the south increased, at the end of 1962 there were only c.11, 300 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam.

Diem's removal

Diem's regime had become vociferously opposed by Buddhists who believed they were discriminated against. In May 1963 government troops fired on marchers in Hue protesting a ban on public celebration of Buddha's birthday, killing nine. In July police used clubs to break up a Saigon demonstration against religious discrimination. In August special forces under direction of Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu raided pagodas, arresting 1,400, and martial law was declared. A Buddhist monk publicly set himself alight in protest against Nhu's repression. The CIA later concluded that "it is possible that by 1963 the conflict could not be won at all, or at least by any politically sustainable level of American commitment."²⁸

U.S Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge recommended Diem's overthrow to Kennedy in a cable the same month. Major Generals Duong Van ("Big") Minh and Tran Van Don requested and received assurance through the CIA that the United States would support a coup. On 1 November ARVN units seized control of Saigon, disarmed Nhu's security forces and occupied the presidential palace. General Nguyen Van Thieu led troops who seized the presidential palace.²⁹

Diem and Nhu were killed. Kennedy had not been aware that he had approved Diem's assassination. When told of the assassinations Kennedy was assured the brothers had been tyrants. He was sympathetic. "They were in a difficult position. They did their best for the country."³⁰ Three weeks later Kennedy was himself assassinated in Dallas.

²⁸ T. Ahern Jr., *CIA and The House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-1963*, Washington DC, 2000, p.219. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB284/index.htm>.

²⁹ J. Stowe, "Nguyen Van Thieu", *The Independent*, 2 October, 2001.

³⁰ Schlesinger, p.998.

Johnson's War

Kennedy's Vice-President Lyndon Johnson succeeded him and soon became acutely sensitive to the political costs of being thought to be losing the Cold War, especially as an unelected president. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and others from Kennedy's Administration advised Johnson to continue the war to contain communist dominance that could become hegemonic through all of Southeast Asia.³¹ Johnson decided to continue replacing General Harkins with General William Westmoreland, a former superintendent of the military academy at West Point. The DRV subsequently became more closely allied to China and decided to escalate the struggle in the south.

In January 1964 Generals Nguyen Khanh and Tran Thien Khiem overthrew Generals Minh and Don, but they allowed Minh to remain as figurehead Chief of State. Khanh won Washington's approval by pledging no compromise peace with the NLF or the DRV.³² However, the regime was soon embattled by dissident army units in the Mekong delta, and by Buddhists who had discovered that they were a considerable political power after years of persecution under the French and Diem.

Khanh met with Tri Quang of An Quang pagoda and donated money to the Buddhists to buy their political acquiescence.³³ However, fractiousness and ineptitude of his regime soon alienated civilians. By early 1964 South Vietnam was in a state of political and military collapse.³⁴ President Johnson decided to bring direct but covert pressure on the DRV by approving Operation Plan 34A (OPLAN 34A), providing for dropping of South Vietnamese saboteurs into

³¹ U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States, Doc. 8. Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President, Tab B: Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President, Washington, 7 January, 1964. Comment on Memoranda by Senator Mansfield. http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/index.html

³² L. Addington, America's War in Vietnam, Bloomington, 2000, p.70.

³³ S. Karnow, Vietnam, A History, N.Y., 1983, p.380.

³⁴ H. Schandler, America in Vietnam, Lanham, 2009, p.45.

the north, and creation of a Special Operations Group to assist South Vietnamese commandos carrying out coastal raids.³⁵ Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and others conferred in Honolulu in June and decided the military situation was approaching hopeless, and to increase aid to South Vietnam, while the Pentagon refined plans to bomb the DRV.³⁶

The second Lao coalition government had collapsed in May. Believing military victory in the south was close, the DRV sent more troops south through Laos along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. China and the Soviet Union competitively promised to militarily support the DRV.

Assistant Secretary for the Far East William Bundy presented Johnson with a plan for a bombing campaign to destroy the DRV's railroads, industries, barracks and training camps, and a naval blockade of Haiphong and other ports to force the DRV to desist from assisting the insurgency the south. Johnson realised that he would need a declaration of war or other emergency authority from Congress to enact the plan. The State Department prepared an enabling resolution for the president to put to Congress, but Johnson decided to first attempt diplomacy to achieve peace. He offered the DRV diplomatic recognition and generous economic assistance if they desisted from assisting the southern insurgency, and threatened air and sea offensives if the offer was rejected. The DRV rejected the offer, insisting that the Americans first had to withdraw from the south, and on formation of a neutral government including representatives of the NLF, and free elections to decide the future status of the south.³⁷

On 2 August South Vietnamese shelling of two offshore islands of the DRV in the Gulf of Tonkin was being 'observed' by the USS Maddox and USS C. Turner Joy as part of a deliberate

³⁵ Addington, p.71.

³⁶ U.S. State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Doc. 187. Summary Record of a Meeting, Honolulu, June 1, 1964, 8:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d187>

³⁷ Addington, pp.71,72.

policy of raids designed to provoke North Vietnamese defence capabilities so that they could be measured by large U.S. warships.³⁸ Three DRV patrol-torpedo boats began to overtake the destroyer. The aircraft carrier USS Ticonderoga launched jets to assist the Maddox but the PT boats attacked the destroyer, launching two torpedoes and firing with small-calibre weapons, probably within the 12-mile limit the DRV recognized as their territorial waters. The Maddox dodged and disabled one PT boat. The other boats were pursued by the planes from the carrier and damaged with gunfire and rockets, in what became known as the First Gulf of Tonkin Incident.³⁹

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara claimed the Maddox had been conducting a 'routine patrol' in international waters of the Gulf of Tonkin when it had been attacked without provocation. The Maddox and the destroyer C. Turner Joy were ordered to continue the DESOTO patrol that was so provocative the captain of the Maddox feared Hanoi would send another PT mission to attack so that his crew and that of the Turner Joy were alert for any such incident. On 4 August, after being warned by U.S. intelligence of an imminent attack, the Maddox reported three or four patrol boats approaching at high speed. Sonars counted 22 enemy torpedoes.⁴⁰ Captain Herrick ordered the Maddox and the C. Turner Joy to fire at the radar images, but no-one reported a visual sighting. Herrick reported possible sinking of three PT boats.⁴¹ Much later in the day the White House reported a second unprovoked attack in the Gulf of Tonkin. In retrospect it seems likely that the second incident was nothing more than the excited imaginations of tense and tired men misled by their own senses.⁴²

³⁸ E. Becker, *America's Vietnam War, A Narrative History*, New York, 1992, p.80. Addington, p.70-78.

³⁹ Addington, p.74. J. Galloway *The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution*, New Jersey, 1972, pp.50-52.

⁴⁰ Karnow, p.370.

⁴¹ Addington, p.75.

⁴² McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p.128. T. Larimer, "McNamara and Giap Revisit Gulf of Tonkin", *International Herald Tribune*, 10 Nov, 1995, p.1.

After an investigation Herrick came to the conclusion that there had been no attack, and Commander James Stockdale of the Ticonderoga reported he had found nothing after repeated passes over the area.⁴³ The DRV, which had quickly claimed a successful territorial defence in the first incident denied any of its boats were involved in the second.⁴⁴ However, Commander in Chief in the Pacific (CINCPAC) Admiral Sharp insisted there had been an attack and so reported to Washington.

The American public and the U.S. Congress were outraged after Secretary McNamara misleadingly proclaimed he had “unequivocal proof” of the North Vietnamese attack, and the American Administration used the incident to push what became popularly known as the Tonkin Gulf Resolution through Congress, obtaining extraordinary power for the president to declare or wage war.⁴⁵ After he ran for re-election on a platform of de-escalation President Johnson subsequently interpreted the resolution as authorisation to prosecute war in Southeast Asia as he saw fit, ordering the U.S. Air Force to move squadrons into Thailand, and the U.S. Navy to increase force projection in the region.⁴⁶ After recommendations from his advisors to send a message to the DRV, Johnson increased bombing to the heaviest level of all history to then.⁴⁷

⁴³ Addington, p.76.

⁴⁴ Addington p.77.

⁴⁵ N. Sheehan, A Bright and Shining Lie, New York, 1988, p.379. See Statement by Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, to Joint Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations and The Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, Eighty-Eighth Congress, Second Session (August 6, 1964). p.8-10, quoted in Galloway, p.192-195, and Statement by the Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam Concerning the U.S. Government's Brazen Air Strafing and Bombing Against the Territory of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, 6 August, 1964, in Galloway pp. 529-530. Subsequently Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, asserting that McNamara lied to Congress and the “Incident” had been a deliberate provocation. Ellsberg has since been supported by others such as George Ball and Sedgwick Tourison, who also worked for the U.S. Defense Department. In 1984 U.S. Intelligence admitted that reports of the first attack were mistaken as a second attack. (Capt) R. Ford, New Light on Gulf of Tonkin”, www.TheHistoryNet.com/Vietnam/articles/1997/08972_text.htm, p.3. McNamara continued to deny that the United States had deliberately provoked confrontation, although admitting that the resolution had subsequently been misused. R. McNamara, with B. VanDeMark, In Retrospect, N.Y., 1995, pp.120, 128-142.

⁴⁶ Addington, p.78.

⁴⁷ R. McNamara, J. Blight, R. Brigham, Argument Without End, N.Y., 1999, p170.

Coups

In mid-August General Khanh proposed the 'Vung Tau Charter', which would eliminate General Minh's position as Chief of State and establish a president as chief executive to be elected by a Military Revolutionary Council.⁴⁸ After public disorder and rumours of a coup had brought troops into the streets of Saigon Khanh withdrew the Charter and convened a meeting of the generals with stakeholders to agree on a provisional government and draft a constitution. He declared a state of emergency and reimposed press censorship.

After he offered to resign, a triumvirate consisting of Minh, Khiem and Khanh were established to supervise the transition, with Minh acting as head of state and Khanh as prime minister.⁴⁹ An attempted coup led by Brigadier-General Lam Van Phat and General Duong Van Duc collapsed within a day. Air Vice Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky threatened to blast the coup plotters from the air unless they surrendered.⁵⁰ Khanh and other 'young Turks' including Ky and General Nguyen Van Thieu then launched a coup in December, ousting Minh and Kiem. Kiem was sent into honourable exile as Ambassador to Washington and Minh was despatched on a 'goodwill tour'.⁵¹

A civilian façade to the government was established with new chief of state Phan Khac Suu, an octogenarian who dressed as a Confucian mandarin, and Prime Minister Tran Van Huong, who had been a schoolteacher and mayor of Saigon. However, demonstrations continued with the Buddhists protesting that the government was continuing Diem's repression. United States Ambassador Maxwell Taylor warned Ky, Thieu and others that chronic disorder could

⁴⁸ M. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares*, N.Y., 1972, p.319.

⁴⁹ Taylor, p.320.

⁵⁰ Karnow, p.381. Ky customarily attired himself in a flashy flying suit with a bright purple scarf and ivory-handled pistol ostentatiously at hip, and had a reputation for loose talk. CIA Memorandum 8 October, 1964, Johnson Papers, National Security Files, Country File: Vietnam, Box 7, quoted in Herring, p.151.

⁵¹ Karnow, p.381.

discourage the US Congress from increasing aid.⁵² However, the ‘young turks’ were soon demanding the forcible retirement of ‘old guard’ generals including Minh, claiming they were “fomenting unrest.”⁵³

In October China exploded their first atomic bomb, and President Johnson became more concerned that China could confront any increases of American military activity in Vietnam with overwhelming force as they had in Korea, or even with nuclear force. In the Soviet Union Premier Nikita Krushkev was replaced by hardliners Leonid Brezhnev and Andrei Kosygin. The Johnson Administration decided on limited war strategy to attempt to contain communist hegemony while avoiding escalation to nuclear war.⁵⁴

On 1 November the NLF penetrated ARVN security around the base at Bien Hoa, 12 miles from Saigon, destroying six B-57s with mortars and killing five Americans and four Vietnamese.⁵⁵ Days later President Johnson overwhelmingly defeated Barry Goldwater for the United States presidency after Goldwater had suggested possible use of nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia.

The Huong government struggled to improve governmental performance. Meanwhile, Buddhist demonstrations kept Saigon disturbed.⁵⁶ Huong declared martial law, which Khanh and Ky interpreted as a move to reinstall General Minh, and they began to plot.⁵⁷

In December 1964 the ‘young turks’ arrested Minh and four other generals and flew them to Pleiku. They set up an Armed Forces Council with Khanh as titular head. United States Ambassador Maxwell Taylor summoned the ‘young Turks’ and berated them for their

⁵² N. Ky with M. Wolf, Buddha’s Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam, N.Y., p.110, 111. N. Ky, Twenty Years and Twenty Days, N.Y., 1965, pp. 53, 54.

⁵³ Karnow, pp.381, 382.

⁵⁴ G. Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, Austin, 1964, p.4.

⁵⁵ Taylor, pp.323, 324.

⁵⁶ Taylor, p.325.

⁵⁷ Karnow, p.382.

interference in politics.⁵⁸ Taylor advised Khanh to resign and go abroad but Khanh responded by hinting that he might expel Taylor. Taylor replied that that would end United States responsibility for Vietnam, and suspended some military and civilian assistance programs. Despite Taylor's attempt to exert authority the South Vietnamese were confident the United States would not risk their global reputation and strategic position by abandoning them, as the United States was increasingly obviously keen to prosecute war against communist hegemony.⁵⁹

On Christmas Eve a car bomb exploded at the Brinks Hotel killing two Americans.⁶⁰ Ambassador Taylor again recommended retaliation but Washington decided the political situation was too unstable.⁶¹ As the year ended and into the next, the PLAF defeated a larger US trained and equipped ARVN force, demonstrating that the ARVN was vulnerable even with American advice.

Prime Minister Huong had meanwhile consulted neither the Catholics nor the Buddhists on political appointments, alienating both.⁶² The Buddhists continued to vigorously demand his resignation and Khanh offered to protect Huong if four army officers including Thieu and Ky were given cabinet posts. He also encouraged the Buddhist protests which had begun to turn on the United States, sacking an American library at Hue and demonstrating against the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. On 27 January the military elite deposed Huong and returned Khanh to power. After the Americans indicated they had lost confidence in Khanh as a head of state, he appointed a civilian prime minister, Nguyen Xuan Oanh, and retained Phan Khac Suu as chief of state.⁶³

⁵⁸ Taylor, p.330. Prados, p.120.

⁵⁹ Karnow, p.383.

⁶⁰ Addington, p.79.

⁶¹ Taylor, p.333.

⁶² FitzGerald, p.257.

⁶³ Taylor, p.334.

Taylor proposed withdrawing recognition from Khanh but he was overruled by Washington. However, he signalled to Khanh's rivals that he favoured a change.⁶⁴ Ky, Thieu and others began to plot Khanh's overthrow. In mid-February Khanh replaced Oanh with a new prime minister, Dr Phan Huy Quat. Several battalions of troops entered Saigon to occupy the usual strategic vantages, and surrounded Khanh's house. However, Air Vice Marshal Ky threatened to bomb Saigon unless they surrendered. The plot, concocted by General Lan Van Phat who had attempted to seize power the previous September, and Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, a communist agent attempting to stir trouble, was ended when the rebels demanded Khanh be dismissed and sent into exile.⁶⁵

South Vietnam's senior officers voted to strip Khanh of his authority and he left the country as a "roving Ambassador." The CIA began their support of Thieu.⁶⁶ Ambassador Taylor had assessed Thieu as a man of "considerable poise and judgment."⁶⁷

After the NLF cut roads connecting the Mekong delta with Saigon prices, especially of the staple rice, began to rise. Quat attempted to deal with an increasingly fraught political situation but soon discovered he was overruled by the Chief of State, and by Thieu, and resigned.⁶⁸ General Thieu explained to a gathering of 'young turks' that the military had to form a government now that civilian government had failed.⁶⁹

A new government was installed with Thieu as Chairman of the Military Leadership Council,

⁶⁴ Karnow, p.384.

⁶⁵ Taylor, p.337. Karnow, p.385. Thao was 'fingered' by Thieu. FitzGerald, p.263. Thao was later captured and strangled by supporters of the Ky-Thieu regime. R. Schaplen, The Road From War, N.Y., 1970, p.16 (24 April 1965). Shot on Thieu's orders. Ky, Twenty Years, p.64.

⁶⁶ D. Valentine, The Phoenix Program, N.Y., 1990, p.145.

⁶⁷ Taylor, p.345. A slightly later CIA profile observed of Thieu that, "His attitude to the United States is difficult to determine." CIA, Office of Central Reference, Biographic Register, "Nguyen Van Thieu: Republic of Vietnam, Second Deputy Premier," no date, LBJL, LBJP, NSF, International Meetings Series, Box 29, Folder "McGeorge Bundy Trip to Saigon", 2/4/65, v.IV (1 of 2)", quoted in Prados, p.343.

⁶⁸ Ky, Twenty Years, p.65.

⁶⁹ Ky, Buddha's Child, p.4.

effectively chief of state, and Ky, who promoted himself to Air Marshall, as Prime Minister.⁷⁰

US presidential advisor William Bundy later observed that the Ky-Thieu directorate “seemed to all of us the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel.”⁷¹ While popular with the Air Force, Ky lacked a substantial independent political base or mass support. He chose Nguyen Ngoc Loan who had served as his deputy commander as his Director of the Military Security Service (MSS), and power broker.⁷² However, the Buddhists opposed continued military rule and Ky was unable to effect change without persuading Corps commanders to persuade province chiefs.⁷³ Obvious political rivalry between Ky and Thieu began to develop.⁷⁴

War against communism

In February 1965, the Johnson Administration decided to undertake airstrikes against the North to pressure Hanoi to end support for the southern insurgency.⁷⁵ However, the DRV, based on an agricultural peasant economy that was relatively self-sufficient, was not a particularly vulnerable bombing target.⁷⁶

The Hanoi government ordered evacuation of northern cities so that although massive the airstrikes were less effective than expected. Thieu and Ky told Secretary McNamara that 200,000 American and other forces were needed to hold back Communist attacks.⁷⁷ In March the first US ground troops landed at Danang. The United States initially committed ground troops to protect airbases but was soon using airpower and artillery against villages. Despite American bombing, increases in aid and intervention of ground forces, the military situation in the south was soon

⁷⁰ Sheehan, p.559. Prados, p.121. B. VanDeMark, Into the Quagmire, New York, p.147.

⁷¹ William Bundy oral history interview, Johnson Papers, quoted in Herring, p.151.

⁷² A. McCoy with C. Read & L. Adams II, The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia, N.Y., 1972, p.167.

⁷³ FitzGerald, p.312.

⁷⁴ Ky, Twenty Years, p.77.

⁷⁵ Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, p.5.

⁷⁶ Addington, p.81.

⁷⁷ L. Johnson, The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-69, N.Y., 1971, p.144.

deteriorating.

The desertion rate of conscripts from the ARVN was soon as high as 50%. Corruption, draft resistance and deferments robbed the ARVN of needed manpower throughout the war. Popular opinion held that you only had to be a member of the Can Lao party to achieve occupational deferment. The Can Lao party had been outlawed by General Khanh in 1964, but the organisation had been revived under Ky and Thieu providing an umbrella organisation for those seeking favour from the government. Only those invited could join.⁷⁸ The officer corps was inclined to let the Americans run the war and the high command was “close to anarchy” from internal intrigue.⁷⁹ In August the American command in Saigon reported that the NLF had put five South Vietnamese combat regiments and nine battalions out of action.

The US military began to more aggressively requests additional troops and expanded mission after the political decision to become involved.⁸⁰ General Westmoreland soon decided that he would have to ask for large increases of American forces to avert military defeat, and that he needed more than double the number of American troops then in the pipeline, to prevent South Vietnam’s collapse.⁸¹ Agreeing that the United States would have to take over conduct of the war, President Johnson approved Westmoreland’s request for 44 additional combat battalions.

Bombing of the North had been suspended from Christmas to the end of January 1966 to induce the DRV to negotiate. North Vietnam had used the opportunity to improve their anti-aircraft defences and give extra training to their small jet air force.⁸² They continued to put forward hard terms for peace talks, demanding withdrawal of American troops from the south

⁷⁸ Brigham, ARVN, pp.24 25.

⁷⁹ W. Depuy, Memorandum for the record, 9 March 1965 and memorandum to General Westmorland, 13 April 1965, William Depuy Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa, Folder D(65), quoted in Herring, p.150.

⁸⁰ Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, p.31.

⁸¹ Karnow, p.422.

⁸² N. Sheehan, “U.S. Officers See Hanoi Air Threat”, The New York Times, 4 February, 1966.

and agreement to the program of the NLF.⁸³

President Johnson and Secretary McNamara eventually decided to apply a ‘tourniquet’ bombing strategy they called ‘Operation Rolling Thunder’ to persuade acquiescence. Fighter-bombers based in Thailand and naval attack squadrons from the Gulf of Tonkin would carry out most missions, while B-52s flying from Guam, and later Thailand, were occasionally launched against peripheral areas. The Americans constructed huge new airbases in South Vietnam with 3,000 metre runways, six new deepwater ports, and 75 tactical airbases. ‘Operation Steel Tiger’ attacked the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian panhandle while predecessor ‘Operation Barrel Roll’ was refocussed on northern Laos in support of a CIA-supported Hmong army against the Pathet Lao.⁸⁴ By the end of December consensus in the Administration favoured bombing as mechanism to encourage responsible political behaviour in South Vietnam.⁸⁵

Then a communist attack on a United States advisors’ base at Pleiku killed nine US servicemen. Presidential adviser McGeorge Bundy was visiting Saigon and joined Ambassador Taylor’s recommendation of a bombing retaliation.⁸⁶ McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara presented Johnson with what became known as the ‘fork in the road’ paper, suggesting either enhanced use of military power or attempted negotiation, concluding that the current policy was not working.⁸⁷

In February 1965 U.S. warplanes made ‘reprisal attacks’ against targets in the DRV, ‘Operation Flaming Dart’. Then on 10 February NLF agents blew up the Viet Cuong Hotel in Qui Nonh killing 23 Americans. Johnson ordered a further bombing retaliation, Operation

⁸³ S. Topping, “Hanoi’s Peace Terms”, *The New York Times*, 4 February, 1966.

⁸⁴ Addington, p.82.

⁸⁵ McNamara, Blight, Brigham, p.171.

⁸⁶ Taylor, p.335.

⁸⁷ U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States, Johnson Administration, Vol. II, Vietnam, Doc. 42 Memorandum from the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, Washington, 27 January, 1965. [www.state.gov/www/about state/history/vol ii/31 45.html](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/31_45.html).

Flaming Dart II, and ordered Admiral Sharp to commence Operation Rolling Thunder.⁸⁸

South Vietnamese political culture

Hundreds of thousands of rural dwellers had fled to urban areas to avoid the fighting, to subsist often from corruption in shantytowns on the edges of American bases.⁸⁹ Presumably prompted by Johnson, the South Vietnamese leaders agreed that social and economic reform was vital to defeat the communists, proposing what amounted to a social revolution based on resumption of land reform.⁹⁰ After a meeting in Honolulu in February President Johnson and the two South Vietnamese leaders issued a communiqué emphasizing the need for pacification of South Vietnam.⁹¹ Pacification was to include rural development, new construction projects and renewed emphasis on Rural Development cadres begun under Diem.⁹² Johnson also asked the South Vietnamese to accelerate improvements of the ARVN, which the Americans already considered ineffective.⁹³ Ky stressed his position that the Saigon government would never deal with the NLF.⁹⁴

Fearing that the Honolulu meeting presaged intensification of the war, First Corps Commander General Nguyen Chanh Thi provoked demonstrations in Hue and Danang that soon spread to Saigon, as Buddhist monks demanded return to civilian rule. After unsuccessfully attempting to relieve him of command, Ky eventually promised Thi promulgation of a constitutional convention and creation of a National Assembly to defuse the crisis. In September a Constituent Assembly was elected from officially approved candidates to begin work on a new

⁸⁸ Addington, p.83.

⁸⁹ Addington, p.105.

⁹⁰ D. Duncanson, Government and Revolution in Vietnam, London, 1968, p.360.

⁹¹ Johnson, p.245.

⁹² D. Andrade, Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War, Lexington, Mass, 1990, p.53.

⁹³ Prados, p.156.

⁹⁴ T. Wicker, "Johnson-Ky Talks Begin with Accord on Reforms as a Key to Winning War", The New York Times, 6 Feb, 1966.

constitution, but the Assembly was denounced by Buddhist leaders.

In October South Vietnamese leaders again met with President Johnson in Manila.⁹⁵ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had become disillusioned with the air war, advising Johnson that “at the proper time we should consider terminating all bombing in North Vietnam.”⁹⁶ By the end of 1966 the United States had dropped more bombs on the DRV than it had dropped on Japan during the Second World War and more bombs than it had dropped during the Korean War, while losing almost 500 aircraft to improving air defences. There were then c.362,000 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam, augmented by contingents totalling c.50,000 from South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand.

Rising casualty numbers and television and enhanced press coverage of the war in the United States and soon began to persuade popular sentiment against the war and anti-war demonstrations began to attract international attention. Senator J. William Fulbright questioned whether the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution had authorised the president to escalate the war. Senator Robert Kennedy called for a negotiated peace in Vietnam. The Berrigan brothers, both Catholic priests, spilt blood over draft records in Maryland. While obliged to Johnson for his Civil Rights Act and ‘War on Poverty’, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out that the war was draining resources like a “demonic, destructive suction tube.”⁹⁷

In March, Johnson met with Ky and Thieu on Guam. Johnson knew that he was having trouble justifying a war for democracy that only perpetuated dictatorship, and institution of democracy became his major concern.⁹⁸ Presidential elections were scheduled and Thieu quickly

⁹⁵ C. Clifford with R. Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President*, N.Y., 1991, p.44.

⁹⁶ McNamara to LBJ, 14 October 1966, LBJP, NSF, NSCM, Box 2, quoted in Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p.47.

⁹⁷ Addington, p.111.

⁹⁸ Clifford, p.449. Prados, p.182.

positioned himself as a candidate, promulgating a new constitution in April.⁹⁹ Rivalry between Thieu and Ky intensified as the 1967 presidential elections approached, with rumours of coup and counter-coup threatening to divide the military and paralyse the war effort.¹⁰⁰

US Ambassador Bunker invited Thieu, Ky and Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff to lunch and warned them that they and the other generals would have to argue out the issue without further power plays. This constraint advantaged the more diplomatically effective and prepared Thieu.¹⁰¹ Thieu had worked as secretary of the generals' committee and had been assiduously wooing the generals' support.¹⁰² He warned of Ky's alleged violations of campaign law by premature campaigning, and intimidation by Ky's police chief, Brigadier Loan.¹⁰³ Ky knew when he was outgunned. After Corps commanders and the Americans failed to support him, Ky abruptly decided to withdraw, and agreed to run as vice-presidential candidate with Thieu.¹⁰⁴

The CIA began a program of political education.¹⁰⁵ Communists and 'neutralists', pro-Communists and anyone suspected of opposing the American presence and the Saigon system were barred from participation in the elections.¹⁰⁶ Favoured presidential candidate General 'Big' Minh had his candidacy rejected by the National Assembly on grounds that his running mate,

⁹⁹ An American-written document providing for presidential elections in 1971. S.Ambrose, Nixon, The Triumph of a Politician, N.Y., 1989, p.463.

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, p.262.

¹⁰¹ Sheehan, p.669.

¹⁰² Prados, p.344.

¹⁰³ General Edward Lansdale reported that, "Loan has access to substantial funds through extra-legal money-collecting systems of the police/intelligence apparatus." He also noted that, "Thieu acts as though the source of his money is limited and had not used confidential funds with the flair of Ky." "Nationalist Politics in Viet Nam", Report of the Senior Liaison Office, p.10, quoted in McCoy, p.117.

¹⁰⁴ Ky, Twenty Years, p.157. Ky, Buddha's Child, pp. 241-246. "South Viet Nam: Thieu on Top" Time, 7 Jul 1967. See also Schaplen, p.156. (7 Oct.,1967). Much later Ky wrote that he did not know why he had suddenly withdrawn in favour of a man who so obviously hungered for power and money. Ky, Buddha's Child, p.245

¹⁰⁵ Valentine, p.71.

¹⁰⁶ Sheehan, p.669

Tran Ngoc Lieng, was still a French citizen.¹⁰⁷ Au Truong Thanh, a Minister of Economics under Ky had had his candidacy rejected by the Assembly the previous day. He was arrested and spent six weeks in prison without charge before leaving for the United States and later exile in France.¹⁰⁸ Truong Dinh Dzu was allowed to run but when he revealed that he favoured a peace settlement he then surprisingly won 17% of the vote, second only to Thieu and the better known Ky's 35%.¹⁰⁹ A week later he was arrested, tried by a military court on charges of undermining national morale, and sentenced to five years in prison.¹¹⁰

Energetically supported by CIA and American Embassy propagandists,¹¹¹ Thieu and Ky had won blatantly corrupt elections by adopting Thieu's hard position, pledging to fight to restore peace in Vietnam and end communist subversion, "to check the danger of communist aggression."¹¹² They left the three southern Corps commanders to consolidate their political positions however they saw fit, and made arrangements to support a new and more stable system of corruption,¹¹³ and continued intensified political competition for executive authority.¹¹⁴

Fall of the Saigon regime had been prevented by massive increments of American troop commitments and Thieu was convinced that if the United States continued their military intervention his military opponents would soon be defeated and his political dominance enhanced. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker began to address all policy questions to Thieu.¹¹⁵

On 1 September DRV Premier Pham Van Dong had said a halt of American airraids was a

¹⁰⁷ D. Kirk, "The Thieu Presidential Campaign: Background and Consequences of the Single-Candidacy Phenomenon", Asian Survey, Vol. 12, No.7, Jul 1972, p.612.

¹⁰⁸ Kirk, p.613.

¹⁰⁹ Karnow, p.452.

¹¹⁰ Kirk, p.613. T. Smith, "Thieu's Shifts on Vietcong Role Reflect His New Political Gains", The New York Times, 2 April 1968.

¹¹¹ Prados, p.210.

¹¹² T. Buckley, "Thieu and Ky are Victors in South Vietnam Ballot; 83% of Electorate Votes", The New York Times, 4 September, 1967. Nguyen Van Thieu, President of the Republic of Vietnam, Saigon(?), 1969, p.8.

¹¹³ FitzGerald, p.311.

¹¹⁴ Schaplen, p.159. (7 October, 1967)

¹¹⁵ Snepp, p.13. Parker, p.358.

precondition for peace talks.¹¹⁶ Presidential advisor Clark Clifford and Special Assistant Maxwell Taylor visited South Vietnam and Southeast Asian and Pacific neighbours to discuss possibilities of increased military commitment by allies, but they discovered a reluctance by Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand, countries that could be assumed to be most concerned by implications of a communist victory in Vietnam, to become substantially or at all involved in the conflict.¹¹⁷ On 30 September, becoming convinced that continuing the war would prove politically unacceptable, President Johnson offered to halt bombing if prompt and productive peace discussions were begun. On 29 December Foreign Minister Trinh reiterated that the DRV would only talk after the United States ceased bombing.

American forces conducted periodic sweeps through the country but after they inevitably withdrew the communists would return from sanctuaries across the borders. The US Air Force sprayed millions of litres of an herbicide along the border with Laos and Cambodia, northwest of Saigon and along major waterways to attempt to deny guerrillas jungle cover. They also built a string of fortified bases across the country and deployed electronic warning devices, minefields and infrared detectors to prevent infiltration. However, the DRV soon discovered this strong-point obstacle system was in range of their artillery.

During fiscal 1967, U.S. assistance to South Vietnam was a quarter of the total American aid program.¹¹⁸ At the end of 1967 there were c.485,600 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam.

Neighbouring Political environments

Neighbouring political domains had begun to become similarly contested during the 1960s. The war in Vietnam increasingly ravaged Laos and Cambodia within what had been French

¹¹⁶ "Hanoi Premier Insists Raids Halt Before Talks" The New York Times, 1 September, 1967, p.12.

¹¹⁷ Clifford, p.607.

¹¹⁸ Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, p.21.

Indochina. As the United States attempted to interrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail supplying the NLF in the south, Laos became the most bombed per capita country of the 20th century. With a bombing every eight minutes for nine years 260 million cluster bombs were dropped on the small country.¹¹⁹ South Vietnam threatened to pursue and attack Communist forces into Cambodia, until China assured Cambodia of military support. Prince Sihanouk proclaimed a neutralist policy and broke off relations with the United States when he suspected American involvement in two South Vietnamese plots to overthrow him in 1965, and concluded secret agreements with the Vietnamese Communists to station troops on Cambodian soil. However, Sihanouk was becoming unpopular with an educated elite and increasingly resorting to repression to maintain his rule. Attempting to stem the feared tide of communism in developing Asia, the CIA discovered themselves similarly supporting corrupt authoritarian regimes in Southeast and east Asia during the decades after the Chinese Revolution.

Thailand had been promoted as a bastion of democratic capitalism in Southeast Asia from 1951, but as the United States invested large amounts to fortify the military and police forces, corruption and disaffection became problematic as gaps developed between the rich and poor. In 1968 the king persuaded the military to complete the constitution and restore an elective parliament.¹²⁰ Alienation from the military dictatorship had strengthened the Communist Party of Thailand and by 1969 the armed forces counted 'communist infested sensitive areas' in 35 of 71 provinces.¹²¹

Political identification with the United States had continued in the former American colony of the Philippines across the South China Sea. Filipino troops had fought in Korea, and US bases in

¹¹⁹ 30% didn't detonate, leaving 80 million bomblets, killing over 20,000 since the war. S. Sara, "the Legacy", ABC-TV, Foreign Correspondent, 15 July 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2014/s4044170.htm>

¹²⁰ C. Baker & P. Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, Cambridge, 2005, p.186.

¹²¹ Baker & Phongpaichit, p.184.

the Philippines became crucial to American military action in Vietnam. However, from 1965 agreements reduced the size and number of the bases, and the Philippines only committed non-combatants to Vietnam. Elected president in November 1965 Ferdinand Marcos confronted grave economic problems from underdevelopment exacerbated by corruption, tax evasion and smuggling. Corruption of the previous Garcia and Macapagal presidencies had encouraged cynicism, and Marcos had been accused of corruption while still a senator he was not much expected to bring change.¹²²

From the beginning of his government he attempted to bypass Congress to exercise executive authority. He attempted to encourage rural development by promoting export crops of bananas and pineapples from land made available by 'green revolution' rice strains. However, his heavy borrowing for development soon confronted lack of global demand for the new crops and rising costs of imports.¹²³ He was re-elected in 1969, after as much as \$US50 million, much public funds, had gone into his campaign.¹²⁴ A vast government deficit forced a devaluation of the currency by two thirds after his re-election, and inflation accelerated. Opposition to his political dominance became mobilized as Catholics became more actively concerned with social justice after the Second Vatican Council. The communist Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) resumed organising for "parliamentary struggle" but became divided as a youth movement claimed solidarity with Vietnam's war of liberation and China's Cultural Revolution. The Party expelled the militant young members and they re-established as the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).¹²⁵ The New People's Army (NPA) was formed and began to receive young urban recruits in 1969. The left became more popularised after Marcos discarded the Lopez and

¹²² P. Abinales & D. Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*, Lanham, 2005, p.194.

¹²³ Abinales & Amoroso, pp.196, 197.

¹²⁴ Abinales & Amoroso, p.198.

¹²⁵ Abinales & Amoroso, p.199.

Laurel families who announced their sympathies with “the Revolution” and opened their television stations and newspapers to student radicals.¹²⁶

Government corruption was increasingly exposed and Marcos was on the defensive.¹²⁷ However, as he neared the end of his constitutionally limited term Marcos pressed for adoption of a parliamentary style of government that would have allowed him to remain in office. He was then revealed to have bribed constitutional convention delegates to overturn the third term ban.¹²⁸

In Indonesia the military had become involved in business after 1957, often as real or bogus partners of Chinese Indonesians, to supplement inadequate wages and allowances. The military soon began to challenge the other national political ascendancy of the Communist Party (PKI).¹²⁹ In 1964 and 1965 Indonesia embarked a policy of confrontation against the newly independent neighbouring state of Malaysia that further facilitated political dominance of the nationalist PKI.¹³⁰ However by 1965, after Sukarno’s nationalist policies had discouraged investment the Indonesian economy was collapsing. Sukarno increasingly attempted to ally with China, and withdrew from the United Nations Organisation, proposing an anti-imperialist axis of Jakarta, Phnom Penh, Hanoi, Beijing and Pyongyang.¹³¹

On 1 October 1965 a group of army conspirators kidnapped and murdered six army generals, announcing they had acted to prevent a coup. General Suharto, commander of the strategic reserve, seized the initiative from the conspirators and the army leadership, and insisted the coup was part of a PKI plot to seize power. The military embarked on a nationwide purge, slaughtering as many as a million supposed communists across Java and Bali.

¹²⁶ Abinales & Amoroso, p.202

¹²⁷ P. Daroy, “On the Eve of Dictatorship and Revolution” in A. Javate de Dios et al (Ed), Dictatorship and Revolution: Roots of People Power, Manila, 1988, pp.131.

¹²⁸ Abinales & Amoroso, p.204.

¹²⁹ H. Crouch, The Army and Politics in Indonesia, Jakarta, 2007, pp.40, 41.

¹³⁰ Crouch, p.68.

¹³¹ Speech by President Sukarno 17 August, 1965, p.16, quoted in Crouch, p.67.

Suharto subsequently banned the PKI and began to consolidate his political dominance. The previous regime's foreign policy was reversed, and relations with western nations were cultivated. In March 1966, after student demonstrations, the army forced Sukarno to delegate extensive powers to Suharto, and he was placed under house arrest until his death in June 1970.

After independence of Malaya in 1957, Singapore had been expected to attain independence in 1963 but Singaporean politics had increasingly been dominated by communists and other radicals, and Malay political leaders feared that communists would use the island as a base to foment agitation in Malaya. They proposed a federation to incorporate Singapore into a larger more moderate political environment, together with North Borneo and Sarawak, to maintain Malay racial predominance.¹³² The new and potentially regionally powerful polity of Malaysia was soon confronted by Indonesia with attacks on fishing boats, violations of air space and vigilante landings from 1963 until 1966. After the ousting of communists from positions of power in Indonesia relations improved. When communal tensions erupting in Singapore in 1963 threatened to spread into the peninsula Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman began to suspect Lee Kuan Yew had broken a pledge to stay out of federal politics and not mobilize peninsular Chinese.¹³³ In 1964 22 were killed in communal violence.¹³⁴ At suggestion of the Malay states, Singapore seceded from Malaysia in 1965, becoming independent on 9 August 1965.

After a heated election in 1969, communal tensions erupted on the Malay peninsula resulting in a state of emergency being declared in May. Bloody fighting continued for four days with further incidents flaring during the next two months.¹³⁵ Hundreds of thousands died. A new

¹³² B. Watson Andaya & L. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, Basingstoke, 2001, p.283.

¹³³ C. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*, N.Y. 1989, p.280.

¹³⁴ Turnbull, p.283.

¹³⁵ Andaya & Andaya, p.298.

nationalist ideology, *Rukunegara*, was promulgated and censorship imposed. Government policy preferring indigenous Malays to enable them to economic participation continued communal dissonance.

A military coup in Burma had abolished the parliamentary system in 1962. Armed separatist movements subsequently fought against the national military government.

Tet Offensive

In January 1968 communist forces launched coordinated attacks on South Vietnam's major cities, penetrating the US Embassy compound in Saigon. The Communists had earlier launched diversionary attacks in the central highlands, and against Loc Ninh and then against Khe Sanh. Twelve hours before the offensive Westmoreland had realized that some action was imminent but President Thieu had refused to cancel the Tet ceasefire,¹³⁶ furloughed most of his troops, and gone to celebrate the new Vietnamese year with his wife's family in the Mekong delta.¹³⁷

The Communists attacked 39 of 44 provincial capitals, 71 of 245 district towns, 5 of the 6 major cities and more than two dozen airfields and bases.¹³⁸ Vic-president Ky had to take charge and order the armed forces to action.¹³⁹ President Johnson was ready to send more troops but was soon reassured the military situation was stabilised.¹⁴⁰ Although Communist troops were only driven out of Hue after 25 days of heavy fighting, all other towns and bases were only held for a day or two. The North Vietnamese subsequently assessed the offensive as a blunder and a failure, as their untimely action had alienated many South Vietnamese.¹⁴¹ However, the offensive

¹³⁶ Prados, p.232.

¹³⁷ Karnow, p.544. **Pham Van Son, *The Vietcong Tet Offensive*, 1968, Saigon, 1968, pp.25, 26.** The lunar New Year was not only a traditional holiday but celebrated the infiltration of Nyguyen Hue into the capital on the Chinese New Year 1789 to rout General Sun Shih-I while he and his troops were hungover. Duncanson, p.53.

¹³⁸ McNamara, Blight, Brigham, p.365.

¹³⁹ Ky, *Buddha's Child*, pp.261-263.

¹⁴⁰ Herring, p.216.

¹⁴¹ Karnow, pp.544, 545.

made further American escalation politically difficult by convincing many Americans that the war could not be won in an acceptable time and at an acceptable cost.¹⁴²

In February Senate hearings on the Tonkin Gulf incident cast doubt on accuracy of the Johnson Administration's account of the 'Incident.' In response to the Offensive Thieu ordered an increased deployment requiring enhanced conscription. Eligibility for conscription was extended for males from 18 to 38, and 17 year-old youths and men aged 39 to 43 were conscripted to the militia. Avoiding conscription became increasingly popular and volunteerism declined.¹⁴³ Some 139,670 deserted during 1968, and with casualties of over 100,000 almost a quarter of a million were lost to the ARVN, virtually cancelling out anticipated increases. However, Ambassador Bunker reported a greater determination by the South Vietnamese government to increase their forces.¹⁴⁴

General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff conferred in Vietnam with General Westmoreland, and on his return presented a request for an additional 200,000 troops.¹⁴⁵ Westmoreland was promoted to Army Chief of Staff and replaced by General Creighton Abrams.¹⁴⁶ Abrams began to attempt to better coordinate the sprawling war effort making effective control of the population his primary objective.¹⁴⁷ The country was garrisoned with militia forces; Regional Forces (RP), Popular Forces (PF) and a People's Self-Defence Force that grew from nothing to be 1.5 million strong. The RF and PF forces were re-equipped with modern weaponry and given fulltime American advisers.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² Herring, p.241.

¹⁴³ Prados, p.388. Herring, p.234.

¹⁴⁴ H. Schandler, The Unmaking of a President, Princeton, 1977, p.233. Johnson, p.413.

¹⁴⁵ Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, p.51. Clifford, "Viet Nam Reappraisal", p.609. The New York Times, 10 March 1968, p.1.

¹⁴⁶ Schandler, p.234.

¹⁴⁷ Herring, LBJ and Vietnam, p.179. M. Parker, "Vietnam: The War that Won't End", in Foreign Affairs, 53, (Jan 1975). p.355.

¹⁴⁸ Parker, p.3565.

The CIA adopted an ‘Accelerated Pacification Campaign’ to regain a thousand villages before the 1969 Tet season. After a few weeks of detailed planning the concept was presented to Thieu, and he accepted the strategy of population control. The CIA increasingly attempted to statistically diagnose the war but continually encountered corrupt data, from corrupt sources.¹⁴⁹ Having already dropped more weight of bombs than in all theatres of the Second World War, the United States Administration began to become exasperated.¹⁵⁰

Further commitment would require an increased draft call and extensions of tours of duty, and collateral domestic economic damage. In early March the U.S. administration decided that Thieu and Ky should be informed that while the United States was willing to send limited reinforcements and substantial quantities of equipment, continued assistance would depend on South Vietnam putting its house in order and assuming a greater burden of the fighting.¹⁵¹ On 20 March new Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford told South Vietnam Ambassador Bui Diem,

“Tell your government we have run out of time for diplomatic niceties. We are sick to death of Thieu and Ky endlessly feuding while Americans die. Our people are sick and tired of this war, and our support is limited. Your government is facing a clear decision either to broaden the government, clean up the corruption, and take measures to gain wide support among the people, or face the loss of American support.”¹⁵²

Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk spoke to the Ambassador in similar terms.

General Lansdale reported to Ambassador Bunker that Thieu should either create a leadership team or consolidate power for himself. He reported that Thieu’s major potential opponents believed that Thieu had let them take the brunt of the Tet Offensive while doing nothing, as he

¹⁴⁹ Prados, p.327.

¹⁵⁰ Clifford, “Viet Nam Reappraisal”, p.610.

¹⁵¹ H. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam*, Princeton, 1977, p.179.

¹⁵² Clifford, p.500.

had during the 1966 Buddhist crisis.¹⁵³

Thieu had achieved political dominance without strong support in a competitive political atmosphere. He increasingly maintained power by tolerating the corruption of others close to him, while ensuring he was not directly implicated.¹⁵⁴ He began to appoint his supporters to the lucrative administrative positions and key police and intelligence posts Ky had monopolised. He invited US customs advisers to investigate smuggling at Tan Son Nhut airport and report on corruption, until his appointees were able to take over key posts.¹⁵⁵

Also in March 1968, 109 civilians were killed by U.S. troops at My Lai, Quang Ngai province. On 31 March Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election as president to concentrate on waging the war, and began de-escalation, suspending bombing of the north except near the demilitarized zone, and calling for peace talks. In May, Washington and Hanoi agreed to hold preliminary talks in Paris, but as neither side was prepared to make significant concessions talks soon proved difficult. The talks also opened a rift with the South Vietnamese as they began to fear what they perceived as an American betrayal, and became more assertive and independent.¹⁵⁶

A second round of communist attacks on southern cities was repulsed after a few days. ARVN operations were stepped up as part of a general mobilization ordered by Thieu. The Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation project became the Phoenix Program, identifying and assassinating key NLF cadres, but also became corrupted by false data and blackmail.¹⁵⁷ Innocent civilians were incarcerated or killed and much economic aid was siphoned off by corrupt

¹⁵³ Department of State Memorandum, Edward Lansdale - Ellsworth Bunker, "Sensitive Supplement", 7 June 1968, National Security Archive, Edward Lansdale Papers, Box 2, Folder "1968", quoted in Prados, p.332.

¹⁵⁴ Karnow, p.649

¹⁵⁵ McCoy, pp.177, 178.

¹⁵⁶ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p.164.

¹⁵⁷ J. Prados, *Lost Crusader*, N.Y., 2003, pp. 188,194-197, 203, 207-232, 235-236.

officials, although some infrastructure construction was achieved.¹⁵⁸

Clifford met the South Vietnamese leadership in Saigon and realised that they did not really want a settlement with the DRV, “while they were protected by 500,000 American troops and a ‘golden flow of money.’” The United States was still doing most of the fighting and “the South Vietnamese leaders seemed content to have it that way.”¹⁵⁹ The South Vietnamese presented Clifford with a list of equipment they wanted, including between 300 and 400 helicopters, and T-39 trainer jets to be used as private aircraft for senior officials. Clifford bluntly told them that if a settlement could not be achieved the US Administration expected the South Vietnamese to take over the war. He suspected that Ambassador Bunker hadn’t made Thieu and Ky aware of the increasing impatience and frustration of the American president and public.¹⁶⁰

In fact, Bunker had been deliberating “coddling” Thieu to maintain a stable regime.¹⁶¹ However, Saigon had begun to become nervous at prospect of American withdrawal.¹⁶² Thieu was increasingly accused of being as autocratic as Diem, and had recently adopted a private flag.¹⁶³

At a subsequent summit in Honolulu, Thieu sought a commitment from the United States to continue bombing until all DRV troops were withdrawn from the south. Clifford later characterised the meeting as a misguided venture that set back American military objectives in Vietnam. “The long term winner was Nguyen Van Thieu ... his rigid positions stiffened the American position. We had gained nothing in return, not even a vague acceptance of the need for

¹⁵⁸ Parker, p.356.

¹⁵⁹ Clifford, “Viet Nam Reappraisal”, p.615. Clifford to Johnson, 16, 18 Jul 1968, Clifford Papers, Box 5, quoted in Herring, p.234.

¹⁶⁰ Clifford, pp. 550, 551.

¹⁶¹ Snepp, p.11.

¹⁶² J. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, Lawrence, Ka, 1998, p.104.

¹⁶³ Schaplen, p.267. (12 April 1969)

greater flexibility in Paris.”¹⁶⁴

In March 1969 Soviet and Chinese troops had clashed on their border at the Ussuri River, effectively ending the threat of global communist solidarity and hegemony. Savage clashes continued through the year.

Thieu's political dominance

Thieu's relationship with the United States continued to be ambiguous. From 1968, the South Vietnamese political domain's interests were increasingly identified with his own.¹⁶⁵ However, as discussion of a peace settlement progressed Thieu's government began to seem likely to be subsumed into a coalition, or his regime collapse from within as United States' support was withdrawn. At American urging he adopted a new economic program to combat inflation, and instituted an anticorruption program.¹⁶⁶

He appointed Tran Van Huong, who had characterised corruption as the national cancer,¹⁶⁷ as Prime Minister and promised to expand civilian influence in the government. Thieu increasingly withdrew from public affairs, seemingly trusting no-one and making decisions on his own.¹⁶⁸ Attempting to broaden support for his government by trips into the rural areas and controlling appointments of province chiefs as he prepared for political dominance without American support, he increasingly politically overshadowed his only credible rival, Ky. Several prominent Ky supporters had been killed during the Tet offensive, also undermining Ky's political ascendancy.¹⁶⁹ Then on 2 June 1968 a South Vietnamese helicopter with Thieu loyalist Tran Van

¹⁶⁴ Clifford, p.553.

¹⁶⁵ Prados, pp. 331, 332.

¹⁶⁶ Herring, p.234.

¹⁶⁷ Clifford, p.552.

¹⁶⁸ Shaplen, p.248 (13 Jan 1969). William Colby oral history interview, Johnson Papers, National Security File, Country File: Vietnam, Box 101, quoted in Herring, p.235.

¹⁶⁹ CIA Cable (IN 27249), 9 June, 1968, LBJL, LBJP, NSF, CFVN, Box 243, Folder “VN: CIA Cables for June 1968 (1)”, in McCoy, p.178.

Hai aboard “accidentally” fired into a crowd including Ky enforcer General Loan and killed more prominent Ky and Loan allies. Ky himself would have been present but claimed he was forewarned by a dream.¹⁷⁰ The nine posts left vacant by the incident, except for the air force transport command were awarded to Thieu’s supporters.

In May Thieu had removed Ky’s associate Nguyen Van Loc, as Prime Minister. He had then sent Ky to the Paris peace talks, knowing that he would continue to be automatically opposed to negotiation.¹⁷¹ Thieu continued to consolidate power within the political domain, increasingly repressing domestic critics with warnings and jail sentences, as he reorganised the military in his favour.¹⁷² Military commanders were chosen on the basis of loyalty to his regime.¹⁷³ This was interpreted by some as within Confucian traditions, but increasingly assured Thieu’s political dominance. He didn’t hesitate to use the secret police against his political enemies.¹⁷⁴ However, supporters were awarded powerful and lucrative posts, and Thieu carefully guarded himself from a coup, so that it was easier for rivals to acquiesce with his leadership than to replace him.¹⁷⁵

He discussed the probability of coup plots with Ky, who was most likely to instigate a coup against him.¹⁷⁶ Replacement of Ky supporters increasingly facilitated control of income from corruption.¹⁷⁷ With loss of Ky’s financial base his supporters in the National Assembly began to

¹⁷⁰ A Vietnamese-U.S. investigation determined that the gunship had suffered short circuit in its fire control system that caused launch of a rocket, directly at General Loan. Prados, pp.332, 333.

¹⁷¹ Prados, p.333.

¹⁷² Smith, *The New York Times*, 2 April 1968. Karnow, p.630.

¹⁷³ G. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, Oxford, 2009, p.194.

¹⁷⁴ Obituary, *The New York Times*, 1 October, 2001, p.A20.

¹⁷⁵ Prados, p.335.

¹⁷⁶ Ky told Thieu that a coup rumour had been reported to him by Ambassador Bunker. Ky perhaps artlessly suggested Prime Minister Huong, Interior Minister Khiem, III Corps Commander Tri and Information Minister Thien could be involved in such a plot, and suggested Thieu send him on an important mission to emphasize their unity. They both speculated that the Americans could be behind the rumoured coup. Thieu suggested the Americans would more likely move for a bombing halt to help get Hubert Humphrey elected. U.S. State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Johnson Administration, Volume VII, September 1968- January 1969. Document 17. “Intelligence Report Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency”, Washington, 16 September, 1968.

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/vii/21590.htm>

¹⁷⁷ Prados, p.337.

transfer their allegiance to Thieu, who was able to disburse financial rewards for agreeable voting. Colonel Tran Van Hai was appointed Director-General of the National Police and began a rigorous purge of Loan's men. Minister of the Interior General Tran Thien Khiem inherited control of Saigon's police apparatus, airport and port customs.¹⁷⁸

Regarded as an honest southern Buddhist capable of counterbalancing the generals, new Prime Minister Tran Van Huong,¹⁷⁹ had attempted to campaign against corruption, which persisted as civil order had become compromised after the Tet Offensive, as police were deployed on paramilitary duty.¹⁸⁰ However, as abundant American cash chased meagre domestic production with few exports inflation had accelerated during the year of Huong's government. Currency manipulation and theft from the American post exchange (PX) system became "monumental."¹⁸¹ Commercial import programs sold American imports locally to pay expenses of the bureaucracy and army, and trafficking in jobs that gave subordinates opportunities to make money enriched the political elite.¹⁸² ARVN soldiers on fixed incomes, had to pay for some of their rations as corruption became endemic.¹⁸³ The American military discovered that as they had resources that the leaders could graft they could obtain elite audience.¹⁸⁴

Huong was serious about ending corruption but he soon discovered that Thieu interposed various obstacles.¹⁸⁵ Ambassador Bunker saw Thieu on corruption cases 78 times.¹⁸⁶ After the United States had recommended firing province and district chiefs, some were replaced in 1968. However, most were working again by the next year. Education Minister Le Minh Tri who had

¹⁷⁸ McCoy, pp.179-181.

¹⁷⁹ Kirk, p.615.

¹⁸⁰ "How goes Thieu's government?" *Time*, 16 Aug 1968.

¹⁸¹ Prados, p.335.

¹⁸² Karnow, p.441.

¹⁸³ In late 1971 a soldier's weekly food allowance bought only a bowl of soup at a roadside stand. Prados, p.341.

¹⁸⁴ Sheehan, p.614.

¹⁸⁵ For other examples of Thieu's corruption see Sheehan, p.549.

¹⁸⁶ Sheehan, p.743.

opposed corruption, was murdered in January and in March Huong himself escaped assassination. When corruption charges were about to be raised against an ARVN commander the majority of the lower house of the National Assembly that Thieu by then controlled demanded Huong be fired. Thieu did nothing about the charges and promoted the general, and Huong resigned.¹⁸⁷

He was replaced by General Khiem who vigorously worked to eliminate dissent and enhance governmental dominance.¹⁸⁸ Thieu travelled across the country opening schoolhouses, unveiling memorials, dedicating new bridges and visiting combat units.¹⁸⁹ He deployed security police to constrain large demonstrations and appeased conservative Buddhists with favours, repressing union activity and co-opting the largest union into his political front. Students were closely monitored and political activity was harshly punished.

On 4 April President Johnson revealed that peace talks would be held. The same day Thieu approved increases of the armed forces for the next year.¹⁹⁰ The government and its supporters were increasingly concerned they would be left to the mercies of the NLF.¹⁹¹ However, major American escalation was no longer sustainable. Despite increasingly inevitable peace Thieu continued to push a hard line against a settlement. Members of the National Assembly drawn from a middleclass profiting from the war were also hawkish. Thieu tabled two peace programs in speeches of 25 March and 11 July that amounted to demands for surrender by the Communists.¹⁹²

In July, Thieu again met with President Johnson. He again offered political participation

¹⁸⁷ Prados, p.335.

¹⁸⁸ Kirk, p.615.

¹⁸⁹ Smith, The New York Times, 2 April 1968.

¹⁹⁰ Prados, p.344.

¹⁹¹ Herring, p.235.

¹⁹² Prados, p.345.

within the South Vietnamese political construct to NLF guerrillas, if they surrendered. Johnson agreed to supply South Vietnam more helicopters and long-range artillery. Accepting that American withdrawal was inevitable, Thieu told Johnson that American troops could begin leaving by mid-1969.¹⁹³

In preparation for the American withdrawal Thieu began to attempt to build a popular image. In late 1968 he invited “Big” Minh to return from exile to be a presidential adviser, although Minh was never subsequently asked for any advice.¹⁹⁴ Thieu had several hundred political prisoners released and allowed some political parties to organize within constraints.¹⁹⁵ However, his regime was still based on personal loyalty, and greased by corruption.¹⁹⁶

Thieu balks

President Johnson and presidential candidate Richard Nixon had met at Johnson’s ranch in August and discussed Vietnam. On 30 September, Hubert Humphrey had declared that he would halt the bombing of the north, “as an acceptable risk for peace”, and Thieu had realized that a Humphrey presidency could soon bring coalition government and American withdrawal.¹⁹⁷ Nixon was aware of Thieu’s intransigence and had decided that he could try to win the war, or at least agree to a settlement Johnson couldn’t accept.¹⁹⁸ As the elections approached Nixon let Thieu know he would support his regime if he was elected, encouraging Thieu to delay the Paris peace talks and so undermine the Democratic campaign.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ G. Roberts, “Johnson Assures Thieu of Support”, The New York Times, 21 July 1968. J. Prados, “The Shape of The Table: Nguyen Van Thieu and negotiations to end the Conflict “, in L. Gardner and T. Gittinger (Eds), The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964-1968, Texas, 2004, pp.355-370.

¹⁹⁴ Thieu more than once made a show of “dealing with men whose cooperation he says he wants but of who he is basically afraid”, and when he aroused their suspicion put out rumours they were unwilling to cooperate. Schaplen, p.310. (21 September 1969).

¹⁹⁵ Prados, p.337.

¹⁹⁶ F. Butterfield, “Nguyen Van Thieu Is Dead at 76; Last President of South Vietnam”, The New York Times, 1 October, 2001. Ambrose, p.147.

¹⁹⁷ L. Berman, No Peace, No Honor, Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam, N.Y., 2001, p.32.

¹⁹⁸ E. Kenworthy, “Nixon Suggests He Could Achieve Peace in Vietnam”, The New York Times, 8 October, 1968, p.1.

¹⁹⁹ Clifford, pp.582, 583. Ambrose, p.207. A. Summers with R.Swann, The Arrogance of Power, London, 2000,

Republican political activist Anna Chennault acted as a conduit between Nixon and Thieu.²⁰⁰ She and Nixon's campaign manager and later Nixon's Attorney-General John Mitchell kept in touch by telephone. Nixon feared President Johnson would make a last-minute "grandstand play" before the election.²⁰¹ Henry Kissinger, on the negotiating team, had been cultivated a possible source of information.²⁰² In mid-September Nixon received private word of a planned bombing halt.²⁰³

On 26 September Kissinger warned that something big was happening on Vietnam. "He advised that if I had anything to say about Vietnam during the following week, I should avoid any new ideas or proposals." Nixon later wrote.²⁰⁴ In early October Kissinger passed information that Johnson would soon halt the bombing.²⁰⁵ Chennault had time to pass the information to Thieu who began stalling. Thieu would probably have refused to attend the peace talks without Nixon's encouragement as he had nothing to gain from peace.²⁰⁶ However, he understood that Nixon would provide him with military support to continue his dominance. A CIA bug of his office recorded him saying at the time, "Johnson and Humphrey will be replaced and then Nixon could change the US position."²⁰⁷

pp.297-305. Henry Kissinger later wrote that Nixon may have sent a message to Thieu through intermediaries but had never admitted he had. H. Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, N.Y., 2003, p.53. Kissinger countered that at the time Secretary of State Dean Rusk was urging the Soviet Union to accelerate negotiations to assist Humphrey's election, claiming Humphrey would offer better terms than Nixon. See A. Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents (1962-1986)*, N.Y., 1995, pp.178-81, 190, 191.

²⁰⁰ A. Chennault, *The Education of Anna*, N.Y., 1980, pp. 174, 176, 185. Karnow, p.586. S. Hersch, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, N.Y., 1983, pp.17, 20-23. Ambrose, p.208.

²⁰¹ Nixon, p.273.

²⁰² Prados, p.269. Herring, p.238. n.67. C. Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, N.Y., 2001, p. 11. Kissinger wrote that he did not meet Nixon during the campaign. John Mitchell "invited me to two meetings to inquire about the basic concern of any candidate; whether there would be a surprise agreement before the election. Based on my experience in 1967 ... I told him that I thought it probable that Hanoi would seek to conclude negotiations regarding a bombing halt before the election ... I had no access to information on the negotiations." Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p. 585, Note 2.

²⁰³ R. Nixon, *RN, The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, New York, 1978, p.323.

²⁰⁴ Nixon, p.323.

²⁰⁵ Clifford, p.574.

²⁰⁶ Ambrose, p.215.

²⁰⁷ Summers with Swan, p.301.

Ambassador Bunker thought he had obtained Thieu's agreement for the American negotiating position. Thieu had said that if the Americans were prepared to press the offensive in the south and in Laos, and to resume bombing if the Communists violated the DMZ or attacked the main cities, he was prepared to go along.²⁰⁸ In mid-October the DRV at last accepted participation of the Saigon government in the talks, so that the United States was able to halt the bombing. The Administration cabled Saigon to request the earliest presence of their delegation in Paris.²⁰⁹

Presidents Johnson and Thieu had agreed on a joint statement by early October, but Thieu suddenly backed away.²¹⁰ Talks were set to be announced in October but Thieu informed the 'Free World' allies that he had no idea what had happened, so that the allies then complained they had too had been blindsided by the Americans. On the 15th Bunker reported from Saigon that Thieu wanted to delay the American response to Hanoi while he conferred with his government, and the delay from Saigon was then matched by one from Hanoi. On 17 October the South Vietnamese Foreign Minister told the United States that South Vietnam would not participate in any negotiations in which the NLF would be a separate entity.²¹¹

In a televised address to the nation on the 19th Thieu condemned the North Vietnamese as undeserving of a bombing halt, publicising his opposition to NLF representation.²¹² He insisted that details of the potential agreement except for the bombing halt be left for later discussion.²¹³ He continued delaying tactics while Johnson prepared to announce the breakthrough that could boost Humphrey's vote. On 28 October Thieu told Bunker, "I don't see how we can ask for

²⁰⁸ Saigon 40220, Bunker to Rusk, NODIS /HARVAN/DOUBLE PLUS, 13 Oct, 1968, quoted in Clifford, p.575.

²⁰⁹ Clifford, "Vietnam Reappraisal", pp.615, 616.

²¹⁰ Hersh, *Price of Power*, N.Y., 1983, p.17. Nixon wrote that it "was scarcely in Thieu's interest to acquiesce with a bad bargain. By holding back his support, Thieu fostered the impression that Johnson's plan had been too quickly conceived and too shakily execute." Nixon, p.328.

²¹¹ J. Prados, "October Surprise", in Vietnam Veterans Association, *Veteran* 18, pp23/4 August-September 1998.

²¹² Prados, p.270.

²¹³ Schaplen, p.243, (16 Nov, 1968).

anything more.” The next day he was asking for more time, and assurances he could deal directly with Hanoi.²¹⁴ Johnson realised that Thieu would not accept the peace proposal without imposing conditions the Americans had been explaining for months were impossible.²¹⁵ On 30 October Johnson warned Thieu that Americans held him responsible for blocking peace. Thieu self-righteously retorted that, “This negotiation is not a life and death matter for the US, but it is for Vietnam.”²¹⁶

President Johnson telephoned all three presidential candidates; Nixon, Humphrey and George Wallace, to inform them of a potential breakthrough and Nixon promised to make no statement that would undercut the negotiations.²¹⁷ However, after Johnson’s negotiating initiative began to fray, there were extensive contacts between the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington and key Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon’s staff during the final days of the presidential campaign.²¹⁸ Johnson had become aware from intelligence sources that Thieu’s growing resistance was being encouraged by the Republicans and Anna Chennault.²¹⁹ He decided not to go public because Ambassador Bunker continued to predict that Thieu would accept the American position within a few days, because Johnson and Rusk worried that American popular support for the South Vietnamese regime could be undermined if Thieu’s behaviour and motives became public, and because revealing the Chennault channel would reveal strains between Washington and Saigon to Hanoi.²²⁰ Johnson probably also did not wish to reveal the information was obtained using possibly illegal wiretaps.²²¹

²¹⁴ Johnson, p.517.

²¹⁵ Johnson, p.524.

²¹⁶ “Secretary of State to Embassy Saigon, Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, 30 October, 1968, copies in Harriman Papers, Box 554, quoted in Herring, p.239.

²¹⁷ J. Witcover, *The Resurrection of Richard Nixon*, N.Y., 1970, p.436.

²¹⁸ Prados, pp.269, 270.

²¹⁹ Johnson, p.517.

²²⁰ Clifford, pp.583,587.

²²¹ President Johnson called a meeting to discuss Mrs Chennault’s activities on Nixon’s behalf, but decided not to admit

On 31 October President Johnson ordered all bombing of the DRV halted from the next day to meet Hanoi's condition for productive discussions, although bombing of Laos was intensified. The Saigon leadership broke off contacts with the CIA for a month, indicating the depth of Thieu's disenchantment with the Americans, and Thieu subsequently delegated his side of the relationship to other officials.²²²

Thieu won popularity with Saigon's generals for his hard line refusal to participate in the peace talks, and promised, "I will try to keep flexing my muscle as long as I can." He told cheering members of the National Assembly that he had decided to boycott the expanded peace talks.²²³ Despite lack of mass enthusiasm for his regime local American officials were still reluctant to criticize him openly as they believed he brought stability.²²⁴ However, Johnson advisor W. Averell Harriman urged the president to negotiate without the South Vietnamese, and Secretary of State Clifford proposed starting withdrawal of U.S. troops.²²⁵ Clifford said Saigon had known all along that the NLF would accompany Hanoi to the peace talks, but Thieu's Information Minister Ton That Thien asserted that Thieu had not agreed to the United States formula for negotiations.²²⁶

President Johnson demanded to know from Nixon what Mrs Chennault was up to and Nixon assured him she was acting on her own.²²⁷ Humphrey was informed Nixon had offered Thieu a

that the FBI had been tapping Mrs Chennault phone. Ambrose, p.210, 214. When Congress began investigating the Watergate break-in Nixon considered asking Johnson to ask Congressional Democrats to stop investigating him, attempting to obtain LBJ's cooperation by threatening public disclosure that Johnson had bugged the Nixon and Agnew planes and campaign offices in 1968. Berman, p.35. Hitchens, p.8.

²²² T. Aherns Jr., *CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam*, Washington, October 1998, pp.84-86. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB284/index.htm>

²²³ Berman, p.34.

²²⁴ "Thieu Far out on a Political Limb", *The New York Times*, 10 Nov, 1968.

²²⁵ McPherson to Clifford, 13 Aug 1968, Johnson Papers, McPherson File, Box 523; Clifford notes for meeting with President Johnson, 18 November, 1968, Clifford Papers, Box 6, quoted in Herring, p.240.

²²⁶ "South Viet Nam: The Trials of Thieu", *Time*, 22 Nov 1968.

²²⁷ Witcover, p.442.

better deal after his election, but he refrained from raising the issue in the last days of the campaign.²²⁸ He possibly supposed the intelligence was not clear enough and that revelation might seem like an election ploy and work against him with the electorate.²²⁹ While not releasing details, Humphrey's staff intimated that if they broke the story before the election Nixon would not be able to govern.²³⁰ Humphrey passed Nixon in the polls after the bombing halt. However, on 2 November Thieu announced that he would not participate in the Paris talks with the NLF.²³¹

Nixon publicly commented that the prospects for peace did not seem to be as bright as had been hoped.²³² A few days later Richard Nixon was elected President of the United States. However, he was the first president since 1848 not to carry at least one house of Congress.²³³ Nixon's subsequent support for Thieu may have been because he believed he owed his presidential election to Thieu's timely recalcitrance,²³⁴ or perhaps because he feared Thieu briefing against him. Whatever the reason he wholeheartedly supported Thieu for the next four years. By the end of 1968 there were c.536,100 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam and the deployment was consuming a huge proportion of American military resources.

Nixon's war

Like Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon was determined not to be the first US president to lose a war. He soon discovered that there was little difference between his views on Vietnam's and those of the outgoing Administration, and decided the Johnson Administration would act for him on foreign policy for the next two months. The war had to be brought to an acceptable end,

²²⁸ Matusow, p.436.

²²⁹ Summers with Swan, p.305.

²³⁰ Witcover, p.441. Ambrose, p.214.

²³¹ G. Roberts, "Thieu says Saigon Cannot Join Paris Talks Under Present Plan; N.L.F. Is Top Issue" The New York Times, 2 November, 1968, p.1.

²³² The New York Times, 3 Nov 1968. Ambrose, p.212.

²³³ Berman, p.35.

²³⁴ Berman, p.36.

which meant that Thieu had to be pressured to participate in the peace talks. Nixon had Mitchell call Mrs Chennault and ask her to tell Thieu he had to attend. She reminded Nixon that he had called the talks phony two weeks earlier and refused.²³⁵

Clifford threatened to progress the talks without Thieu, which Thieu professed to understand as a threat to overthrow him if he didn't co-operate.²³⁶ In January 1969, four-party peace talks begin in Paris. After President Johnson had assured him that the United States would not recognize the NLF or impose a coalition government on South Vietnam, and had threatened to begin talks without Saigon,²³⁷ Thieu was persuaded to accept a bilateral arrangement for the talks, but he then began to dispute the shape of the negotiating table.²³⁸ He refused to participate until Ambassador Bunker told him that re-elected President Nixon insisted. He then began to articulate his policy of '4 Nos'; no coalition with the enemy, no territorial concessions, no neutral foreign policy and no communist political activities in South Vietnam.²³⁹ President Nixon and Kissinger, his new Adviser on Foreign Affairs, realized that the war could not be militarily won on politically acceptable terms but insisted on an 'honourable' settlement that would allow South Vietnam a chance of survival. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Wheeler said he believed that Thieu would agree to a small reduction of US forces because Nixon would be politically advantaged, and South Vietnam would seem self-confident.²⁴⁰

The CIA had been reporting on the importance of Cambodia to the NLF from 1965 and after visits by Chinese merchant ships arms traffic through the port of Sihanoukville had become problematic from 1966.²⁴¹ The NLF were also operating from bases inside Cambodia. In

²³⁵ Summers with Swan, p.306.

²³⁶ Ambrose, p.231.

²³⁷ Herring, p.239.

²³⁸ Prados, p.271.

²³⁹ Kirk, 614.

²⁴⁰ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p. 81.

²⁴¹ T. Aherns, Jr., Good Questions, Wrong Answers: CIA Estimates of Arms Traffic Through Sihanoukville,

February Nixon approved General Creighton Abrams' request to bomb communist sanctuaries there. Operation Menu began bombing in March that continued for the next 14 months.

In late March Thieu revealed that his government had offered direct negotiations to the NLF, and once again offered political participation to guerrillas who surrendered. He continued to insist on withdrawal of DRV troops before negotiation.²⁴² While he seemed to be trying to signal that his government had begun to prepare for the political struggle expected to follow a negotiated agreement he was still unprepared to compromise his political dominance by making acceptable concessions. In April President Nixon set forth planning guidance for a specific timetable for Vietnamizing the war.²⁴³

In May the NLF put forward a 10-point peace program that demanded unconditional US withdrawal and a coalition government excluding Thieu.²⁴⁴ In response Nixon called for withdrawal of all "non-South Vietnamese forces," and announced U.S. troops would be gradually withdrawn for 'Vietnamization', after numbers of U.S. troops had peaked at 543,400. Announcements of troop withdrawals soon became essential for continued popularity of Nixon's presidency. The DRV was unimpressed as they believed that after a withdrawal Thieu's continued belligerence would more likely determine the situation than Nixon's promises. They were also unwilling to concede reciprocity for American withdrawal, after Operation Phoenix had assassinated over 20,000 NLF officials and decimated the NLF leadership. The Tet offensive had also cost them casualties, after they had operated on understanding the American and South

Cambodia, During the Vietnam War, Washington DC, 2004.

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB284/index.htm> J. Prados, "Port of Entry: Sihanoukville", *The VVA Veteran*, Vol. 25, No.6, November-December 2005. In fact, the great bulk of supplies was routed through Sihanoukville rather than down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Parker, p.357.

²⁴² Smith, *The New York Times*, 2 April, 1969.

²⁴³ J. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America left and South Vietnam lost its war*, Lawrence, Ka, 2004, p.16.

²⁴⁴ Nixon claimed that his "commitment to Thieu was commitment to stability." He suggested that that was why the DRV was so insistent Thieu be removed. Nixon, p.348.

Vietnamese wouldn't bomb civilian areas.²⁴⁵

In the United States Daniel Ellsberg began to read the 43-volume inquiry into the origins and history of the conflict that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had commissioned, and which had been completed in January. Ellsberg became convinced that the American intervention had been wrong and futile and began photocopying the Rand Corporation copy of what became known as the Pentagon Papers, and smuggling the photocopies out.²⁴⁶

Although he resented having to withdraw from the war, the American political system dictated retrenchment.²⁴⁷ He announced withdrawal of 25,000 troops. Thieu was not happy with Nixon's announcement but Nixon later claimed he privately reassured Thieu that "our support for him was steadfast", and arranged to meet with him on Midway.²⁴⁸ In June, after declining to meet on Hawaii as Thieu had requested, because Nixon did not want to be publicized frequenting a holiday location, Nixon and Thieu met on Midway Island in the mid-Pacific. Thieu sought acknowledgement of his part in helping Nixon win. He later claimed, "He promised me eight years of strong support, four years of military support during his first term in office and four years of economic support during his second term."²⁴⁹

Nixon intended to strengthen ARVN capabilities and bolster the Thieu regime so that the South Vietnamese could take over the war.²⁵⁰ Nixon informed him that the United States would soon make new secret bombing raids on Cambodia, and Kissinger emphasized that Nixon had rejected advice to de-escalate. Nixon told Thieu that his strategy was to demonstrate to the Soviets that their interest lay in helping to end the war. Nixon pointedly asked Thieu how he

²⁴⁵ Hersh, pp.80, 81.

²⁴⁶ Sheehan, p.739.

²⁴⁷ Ambrose, p.278.

²⁴⁸ Nixon, *Memoirs*, p.392.

²⁴⁹ Summers with Swan, p.307.

²⁵⁰ Willbanks, p.16.

intended to progress with political reform and Thieu evasively replied that, “We must not be put into the position of always making new proposals.”²⁵¹ Nixon emphasized that Thieu should act to defuse antiwar sentiment in the United States.²⁵² Thieu had known the Americans would have to withdraw but he was determined to obtain what support he still could. “I know that you have to go, but before you go, you have to leave something for us as friends,” he told Nixon.²⁵³

Realizing that Thieu had most to lose from a compromise deal with the DRV, Nixon and Kissinger began to keep him at a distance from the negotiations.²⁵⁴ The South Vietnamese leadership became increasingly concerned that Nixon was prepared to withdraw American troops, while the DRV remained insistent on settlement without them.²⁵⁵ The NLF and allied organisations met in South Vietnam and formed a Provisional Government of South Vietnam (PRG), and the PRG took the NLF’s place at the conference table in Paris and began to develop an administrative structure from the national level down to districts and villages under NLF control.²⁵⁶

In July, Nixon visited Thieu in Saigon at the end of a round the world trip.²⁵⁷ Thieu said he saw two alternative strategies, “either for the US to speed up the war or to help [South Vietnam] take over more of the war burden.”²⁵⁸ Thieu said they had to seek a military solution or prepare for a long war.²⁵⁹ Nixon asked Thieu if they should make their intention to persist clear to their

²⁵¹ Nguyen Phu Doc, *The Vietnam Peace Negotiations: Saigon’s Side of the Story*, Christianburg, 2005, p.216. U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States, Nixon-Ford Administration, Volume VI, January 1969 to July 1970, Doc 81, NSC “Memorandum of Conversation, Midway Island, 8 June, 1969.” <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/64646.pdf>

²⁵² Prados, p.305.

²⁵³ Nguyen Tien Hung & J. Schechter, *The Palace File*, N.Y., 1978, p.33.

²⁵⁴ Karnow, p.624.

²⁵⁵ T. Smith, “Air of Pessimism Pervades Saigon”, *The New York Times*, 19 June 1969, p.2.

²⁵⁶ Berman, p.53.

²⁵⁷ His 8th visit.

²⁵⁸ U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States, Nixon-Ford Administration, Volume VI, Vietnam, Jan 1969-July 1970, Doc. 103. “Memorandum of Conversation”, Saigon, 30 July 1969”. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/64647.pdf>

²⁵⁹ Prados, p.306.

enemies, still unsure of effectiveness of his ‘madman theory’ that he had often suggested to advisors would induce the communist bloc to reason fearing what he might do. Thieu said yes, and Nixon complained that negotiations had been expensive and given the enemy time, making it obvious he wanted a quick solution to the war. Thieu recommended enhanced bombing.²⁶⁰ Nixon told Thieu he planned to issue a ‘warning’ to the DRV in an unorthodox way.” He told Thieu about his plans for Operation Duck Hook; massive bombing strikes against the north. However, Thieu was not informed that Kissinger was heading to Paris to secretly meet with representatives of the DRV.²⁶¹

In response to Nixon’s request for an initiative, Thieu challenged the NLF to participate in free elections organised by a joint electoral commission and supervised by an international body. However, he was vague on which side would control the electoral machinery. In any case the DRV had already rejected the proposal in advance.²⁶² Thieu remarked that if such elections were to be free and fair DRV forces would first have to withdraw from the south. He then added, “There is a point beyond which we shall get tired of making unilateral acts of goodwill. Hanoi will then have to bear all the consequences of the protracted war.”²⁶³

At the time Henry Kissinger was advising Nixon that Thieu’s failure to broaden his government was disturbing.²⁶⁴ In August Kissinger met Xuan Thuy in Paris to propose a compromise. In September Ho Chi Minh died, aged 79.

As the Americans became pressured by Congress to demonstrate that Saigon was taking over prosecution of the war, the CIA gave Congress figures that indicated that Saigon was

²⁶⁰ Doc. 103. “Memorandum of Conversation”, Saigon, 30 July 1969”.

²⁶¹ Berman, p.54.

²⁶² “Nation: Motion in Saigon, Deadlock in Paris”, *Time*, 18 Jul, 1969.

²⁶³ T. Smith, “Thieu Bids Front Join In Elections”, *The New York Times*, 11 July 1969, pp.1, 2.

²⁶⁴ Memorandum for the President, 10 September 1969, From Henry Kissinger, Subject: Our Present Course in Vietnam, in H. Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, N.Y., 2003, p.587.

undertaking approximately half of the combined expenditure, although the Thieu government actually spent only a sixth of their supposed contribution.²⁶⁵ Nationwide ‘moratorium’ demonstrations were held in October and November, the largest antiwar protests yet. The Administration had attempted to placate antipathy to the war by successfully constraining draft calls, and weekly killed in action (KIA) numbers.²⁶⁶

In South Vietnam a group of 42 journalists, lawyers, professors and five lower-house deputies formed a Committee for Establishment of the Progressive Nationalist Force to create a liberal opposition. However, several members of the committee were questioned by the police. Thirty newspapers were suspended or closed for publishing “unpatriotic” statements. Songs that dwelt on peace were banned and flower decals apparently symbolizing peace were ripped off cars and scooters.²⁶⁷ “Big” Minh, and Senator Tran Van Don, who had participated with Minh in the coup against Diem, formed a National Salvation Front. A dozen opposition leaders came together to charge that Thieu had created a military dictatorship and demand that he be tried for high treason.²⁶⁸

Meanwhile, desertion continued to be problematic, especially at ploughing and harvesting seasons, with a further 123, 000 deserters in 1969.²⁶⁹ At the end of 1969 there were still c.475, 200 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam.

In 1970 Kissinger began a series of secret meetings with the Le Duc Tho. It soon became

²⁶⁵ Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vietnam Policy and Prospects, 1970, Tables on pp. 630, 708, quoted in Prados, p.325.

²⁶⁶ Draft calls had been reduced from 382,010 in 1966 to 162,746 in 1970 to 49,949 in 1972. KIA numbers had fallen from an average of 279 in 1968 to 81 by 1970 to 26 by 1971. Parker, pp.357, 358.

²⁶⁷ “South Viet Nam: The Dissident Intellectuals”, Time, 18 July, 1969.

²⁶⁸ Prados, p.337.

²⁶⁹ J. Collins Jr., Vietnam Studies: The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972, Washington DC, 1975, p.93. www.history.army.mil/books/Vietnam/devtrainrvn/ch4.htm#b4. Other figures in Dong Van Khuyen, Indochina Monographs: The RVNAF, Washington DC, 1980, Table p.140. R. Brigham, ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army, Lawrence, Ka, 2006, pp. 48, 49, 84, 85, 88.

obvious that the DRV was concerned with the future political shape of the southern political domain. Thieu's power would become a bargaining point without his knowledge or consent.²⁷⁰ Nixon's commitment to Thieu was self-imposed, perhaps because he had convinced himself that to abandon Thieu would be to lose the war, and that would be electorally unacceptable.²⁷¹ After lack of progress Nixon settled on an offer of a ceasefire in place with a defined timetable for withdrawal.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese and Lao communist forces drove royalist Lao, Thai and CIA-backed Hmong troops from the Plain of Jars, enlarging a secure logistical corridor through southern Laos. The United States continued to heavily bomb the Ho Chi Minh trail and deployed their electronic surveillance system into that battlefield.²⁷² However, carpet bombing of Cambodia provoked increasing polarization of the Cambodian political domain, eventually facilitating ascendancy of the Khmer Rouge. While Prince Sihanouk was out of the country visiting the Soviet Union in March, his government demanded immediate withdrawal of Vietnamese communist forces from Cambodian territory. The Cambodian National Assembly then voted to depose Sihanouk and installed General Lon Nol as chief of state. Sihanouk subsequently travelled to Beijing and took charge of a government-in-exile to be allied with China and the DRV, and of a force of Cambodian Communists led by Saloth Sar, which had only recently been fighting him.

Saigon dominance

Thieu admitted he needed to broaden political support but insisted that he needed to be convinced of his opponents' "good intentions." After he had jailed prominent opponents

²⁷⁰ Berman, p.69.

²⁷¹ Ambrose, p.388.

²⁷² Prados, p.405.

including the political leader of the An Quang pagoda, Thich Thien Minh, the Buddhists continued to vehemently oppose his regime.²⁷³

Despite his rhetoric and promises he had done nothing on vitally urgent land reform before the Nixon administration continued to give money. The ‘Land to the Tiller’ law in March 1970 was the first true land reform after 13 years of war. However, compensation payments to absentee landlords who had long been unable to collect rents only served to ensure continued loyalty of an enriched elite.²⁷⁴ Prime Minister Khiem told the South Vietnamese Senate that the government wanted a law enabling Thieu to rule by decree in economic or military crisis.²⁷⁵ Thieu had begun to use his decree powers by the end of the year.²⁷⁶

Having alienated many potential supporters Thieu began an attempt to build a broad political movement supposedly on an anti-corruption program, inaugurating the National Alliance for Social Revolution (the Lein Minh Front), which became funded by the CIA with shipments of cash directly to Thieu. Only a small portion of the money was applied to its intended purpose. “The rest was pocketed by members of the Thieu regime.”²⁷⁷ More than \$US 3 million was poured into this political stratagem, but hopes of recruiting 50,000 supporters soon proved vain.²⁷⁸ Thieu’s government continued to be inherently unstable, with poor relations between the Executive and the National Assembly and endemic mistrust of the president by many civilian and military officials.²⁷⁹ In May 1969 Thieu folded the Lien Minh into a new National Social Democratic Front with five other small Parties or factions also funded by the CIA. The CIA also

²⁷³ Schaplen, p.311.

²⁷⁴ Prados, p.326.

²⁷⁵ Chau had roomed with Thieu at Fort Bragg. Valentine, p.50.

²⁷⁶ Prados, p.337.

²⁷⁷ F. Snepp, Decent interval: An Insider’s Account of Saigon’s Indecent End Told by the CIA’s Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam, N.Y., 1977, p.15. (note).

²⁷⁸ Much of the money the CIA lavished on creation of pro-government political Parties was pocketed by Thieu. Snepp, p.15(note).

²⁷⁹ Schaplen, p.294. (12 July, 1969).

subsidized one Saigon newspaper and paid for pro-government articles and editorials in others, and worked to improve distribution of publications considered favourable to the government.²⁸⁰ However, ruling from his presidential palace with a small but factionally divided entourage, Thieu couldn't establish himself as an empathetic national figure.²⁸¹

The American Embassy continuously pressured Thieu to ease repression and fight corruption but, as South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States Bui Diem later observed, "Thieu never refused anything. His usual way was to acquiesce and make promises, then to wait to see what would happen."²⁸² The CIA attempted to replace appointed village chiefs with elections but real power remained with district and province level bureaucrats answering to Thieu. The few egregious offenders Thieu replaced were soon recycled by the ARVN system. Corruption permeated all levels of administration. Drug smuggling provided financial support for much of the military elite.²⁸³

However, as ARVN and allied troops became increasingly present in the villages, supporting the NLF became less acceptable acquiescence, and more dangerous.²⁸⁴ The ARVN had American support and more men and more weapons than the Communists, but Thieu wanted Nixon to preserve a substantial American presence into 1972.²⁸⁵ He emphasized to the Americans that he did "not want a repeat of 1968 where US domestic political considerations influenced decisions on troop levels which proved most damaging to the conduct of the war." According to US Defense Secretary Melvin Laird Thieu, like Nixon, considered the Paris talks worthless except as posturing for the benefit of their domestic electorates.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁰ Prados, pp.339, 340.

²⁸¹ Schaplen, p.343. (31 January 1970)

²⁸² Diem Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History*, Boston, 1987, pp.276, 277.

²⁸³ Prados, p.340.

²⁸⁴ Parker, p.360.

²⁸⁵ Prados, p.405.

²⁸⁶ NSC, Alexander M. Haig, memorandum for the President's File, 18 January 1971, NARA, NLP, WHSF, POF,

Unpopular war

Nixon planned for his invasion of Cambodia to carry Thieu to electoral victory in late 1971, and attempting to reverse the direction of the war. In April 1970 he authorised the invasion by 20,000 American and ARVN troops, claiming to be supporting the Lon Nol government.²⁸⁷ In May an American and South Vietnamese task force invaded eastern Cambodia pursuing communist forces. They captured supplies and military equipment but failed to engage significant communist forces that retreated deeper into the country. The invasion enraged those who had expected Nixon to begin withdrawal from Vietnam, and large antiwar protests proliferated across the United States.

After demonstrators burned the ROTC buildings at Kent State University in Ohio, National Guardsmen called in by Governor James Rhodes when the local police were unable to restore order, killed four young people, some of the dead and other injured innocent students on their way to classes.²⁸⁸ The deaths at Kent State definitively mobilised American opposition to the war. A hundred thousand people converged on the White House to protest Nixon's policy, and on 8 May Nixon announced that all American troops involved in the invasion would be withdrawn no later than 30 June. An increasingly bellicose Congress investigated United States' involvement in the war and repealed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the Senate by a vote of 81-0. American ground troops withdrew from Cambodia, leaving ARVN troops to continue operations. The next day the US Senate passed the Cooper-Church Amendment barring U.S. military personnel from further combat or advisory roles in Cambodia, and denying funds to the president for purpose of sending ground troops into Cambodia or Laos. Senators McGovern and

Memos to the President Series, Box 83, Folder "Beginning 17 January, 1971." Quoted in Prados, p.408.

²⁸⁷ He attempted to claim the invasion had been in response to a request from Lon Nol for assistance, although Lon Nol had only requested arms and money. T. Szulc, The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years, N.Y., 1978, p.264.

²⁸⁸ Addington, p.136.

Mark Hatfield proposed an amendment that would cut off all funding for the war by the end of 1970 that was only narrowly defeated in the Senate.

As the ARVN intervention in Cambodia was more successful than they had been in South Vietnam Thieu had become enthusiastic for the adventure, but Lon Nol became concerned with Thieu's territorial ambitions.²⁸⁹ He was also troubled by the Communists. The DRV had smashed two offensives launched by the American-supported Cambodians and had extended their dominance over Laos. A two-year civil war gradually constrained Lon Nol's political control to Phnom Penh and a few provincial towns.

In August 1970 half-Senate elections in Saigon confirmed suspicions that "Big" Minh, allied with the politically active monks of the An Quang pagoda might defeat Thieu for the presidency.²⁹⁰ Thieu responded by more vigorously emphasizing his opposition to negotiation or compromise and, supposedly to prevent frivolous candidates, by submitting an election law requiring presidential candidates to collect endorsements from 40 of the members of the National Assembly, or 100 of the 550 provincial councilmen, controlled however by Thieu-appointed province chiefs.²⁹¹

The Paris peace talks continued to be deadlocked. The DRV continued to insist that Thieu be removed, according to Nixon convincing him that they were victimizing Thieu so that they could portray him as the only obstacle to peace.²⁹² Thieu continued to attempt to give the Americans a good impression. In late October he and his generals declared that if the Communists rejected a Nixon peace proposal they would undertake new military operations in South Vietnam and

²⁸⁹ Szulc, p.297.

²⁹⁰ Kirk, p.616.

²⁹¹ "South Viet Nam: Two Against Thieu" *Time*, 26 Jul 1971.

²⁹² Nixon, p.468.

Cambodia.²⁹³

In November Lieutenant William Calley went on trial for his part in the My Lai massacre. At the end of 1970 there were still c.334,600 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam. By then the ARVN were able to deploy nearly a million troops. However, critics of the Nixon Administration were demanding evidence that Vietnamization was working and Nixon urged Thieu to order the ARVN to undertake an independent operation into Laos to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail at Tchepone. Lam Son 719,²⁹⁴ was delayed by Thieu several times.²⁹⁵ He eventually ordered his troops to stop when they had captured 3,000 prisoners,²⁹⁶ hoping for fewer casualties, to better protect himself from coups.²⁹⁷

After his forces were blocked from the town three days into the operation, Thieu ordered two ARVN battalions ferried into Tchepone by helicopter, but within another three days Peoples' Army of Vietnam (PAVN) troops threatened to trap the force there. On 9 March the ARVN force was evacuated, and Thieu claimed that the brief occupation of the town had accomplished the mission and ordered a retreat. However, as the ARVN column withdrew, 36,000 PAVN troops vigorously attacked to cut off and annihilate some units, driving survivors to frenzy to escape. Only 9,000 of 17,000 soldiers escaped death or capture.²⁹⁸ The operation not only failed to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail but exposed the ARVN's essential deficiencies. Promotion on loyalty rather than competence had only selected for avoidance of risks to secure wealth and prestige awarded to those who acquiesced with Thieu's political dominance.²⁹⁹

²⁹³ "Saigon's Leaders, Led by Thieu, Confer on Strategy", The New York Times, 24 October, 1970

²⁹⁴ After a victory over the Chinese.

²⁹⁵ Supposedly because he said his astrologer found the timing inauspicious, until Saigon CIA Chief Theodore Shackley bribed the astrologer to change his mind and Nixon ordered full implementation. Prados, p.409.

²⁹⁶ Karnow, p.629.

²⁹⁷ R. Perlstein, Nixonland, The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America, N.Y., 2008, p.546.

²⁹⁸ Addington, p.140.

²⁹⁹ Karnow, p.630.

In July 1971 the DRV negotiators in Paris continued to press for replacement of the Thieu regime. “This administration should be changed.” Negotiator Xuan Thuy told Kissinger,

“You have supplied it with military machinery, a police force and an administrative apparatus for the repression of the people and its opponents. So practically you are maintaining the Thieu regime. I should say that without changing it, there can be no peaceful solution to the Vietnam problem ... You say you cannot do that; we think that you can but you are unwilling.”³⁰⁰

Le Duc Tho added,

“Probably this is the greatest obstacle because the Thieu administration is very dictatorial and warlike ... As long as Thieu remains there can be no peace ... It can be said that the change or keeping of Thieu is the measure of your intention to restore the peace or continue the Vietnamization of the war ... If you change Thieu we shall make large and rapid steps satisfactory to all parties ... With your support Thieu will win the election; without your support, Thieu will lose.”³⁰¹

Confronted by continued demands for Thieu’s resignation Nixon and Kissinger may have feared that acquiescence could have made them hostage to further demands, or that that Thieu might accuse them of betraying South Vietnam, or reveal Nixon’s encouragement of his boycott of the peace talks in 1968. When on 15 July Nixon announced he would visit China the next year. Thieu became suspicious that he was being geopolitically manoeuvred.³⁰²

In the United States Daniel Ellsberg turned over photocopies of a classified document “History of U.S. Decision-making Process on Vietnam, 1945-1967”, to Neil Sheehan of *The New York Times*.³⁰³ The documents supported arguments that consecutive US Administrations had

³⁰⁰ Berman. p.106. Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War, pp.211, 220.

³⁰¹ Berman, p.106.

³⁰² Hung & Schechter, p.9.

³⁰³ The New York Times, 26 September 1971.

misled the public on prosecution of the war that had cost thousands of American lives for a dubious strategic assessment. The day after the Supreme Court overruled Nixon's attempts to quash publication of the Pentagon Papers, Charles Colson recruited former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt to discredit the Kennedy family Nixon still considered his major domestic political enemies with leaks of doctored information about the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Diem assassination. However, the CIA refused to declassify the materials the White House wanted.³⁰⁴ Hunt created a forgery that Colson tried to sell to *Life* magazine.³⁰⁵

He then began to work with the White House Special Investigations Unit (WHSIU), who called themselves the "plumbers", as they were tasked to plug leaks. They began a variety of illegal activities against Nixon's 'enemies', including venturing to destroy Ellsberg's psyche and reputation, and attempting to discover if he had information of Nixon's 1968 dealings with Thieu that could incriminate Nixon.³⁰⁶

Corruption

The American troop withdrawal proceeded, primarily to placate domestic criticism undermining Nixon's presidency. A sense of futility increasingly pervaded the American forces, and the U.S. command in Saigon estimated that 65, 000 GIs were on drugs in 1970.³⁰⁷ After Golden Triangle laboratories began producing the more refined No. 4 heroin the drug became a major problem for American troops from 1970.³⁰⁸ Demand escalated so that by mid-April 1971 the wholesale price of a kilogram had jumped from \$1,240 the previous September to \$1,780.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁴ Perlstein, p.594.

³⁰⁵ When Senator "Scoop" Jackson suggested that the United States exert leverage to demand genuine democracy, Nixon accused him of proposing leverage to overthrow Thieu after the United States had become involved in Vietnam because of complicity in the murder of Diem, preparing for Hunt's faked cable. Perlstein, p.595.

³⁰⁶ Addington, p.141. Prados, p.438. Berman, p.135.

³⁰⁷ Karnow, p.631.

³⁰⁸ McCoy, p.181.

³⁰⁹ F. Belair Jr., "C.I.A. Identifies 21 Asian Opium Refineries", The New York Times, 6 June, 1971, p.2.

Another symptom of loss of morale was increase of incidents of ‘fragging’; murder or maiming of officers by their own troops with fragmentation weapons.

While Thieu was careful to avoid obvious involvement in corruption his supporters and allies were more obviously sustained by the narcotics trade.³¹⁰ Along with members of the National Assembly, General Dang Van Quang was identified as heavily involved. Removed from Four Corps by Ky at American insistence he was transferred to Saigon and became Minister for Planning and Development under Ky, and after Thieu’s re-election, Special Assistant for Military and Security Affairs.³¹¹ Quang’s associate Rear Admiral Chung Tan Cang had been removed from command of the navy in 1965, accused of selling food relief supplies on the black market. Thieu had intervened to prevent prosecution and appointed him as Special Assistant to the Joint Generals staff, and then from December 1966 to August 1969 as Commander of the Military Academy.³¹²

A smuggling network was set up by highranking naval officers to ship opium and heroin from Cambodia after the invasion on which Admiral Cang had acted as an advisor on naval affairs to General Quang. Between September 1970 and March 1971, seven members of the National Assembly were arrested for smuggling. Smuggling continued through Saigon’s international airport Ton Sat Nhut, at such a level “the sole function of customs at the airport seems to be to assist the smugglers to bring in their contraband without hindrance”, according to a February report by U.S. Customs advisers.³¹³

A ‘commercial import program’ sold American imports to generate currency to pay for the

³¹⁰ Karnow, p.440.

³¹¹ Pentagon Papers, Vol II, pp.384, 391. Ky, Twenty Years, p.110. Schaplen, p. 125 (18.2,1967). F. FitzGerald, Fire in the Lake, Boston, 1972, p.311. McCoy, pp.188, 189. S. Hosmer, K. Kellen, B. Jenkins, The Fall of South Vietnam, N.Y., 1980, p.63.

³¹² McCoy, p.192, p.413 n.136.

³¹³ The New York Times, 22 April,1971, p.1, 5.

bureaucracy and army. Connected entrepreneurs obtained licences to import consumer luxuries they sold to an urban elite prospering from the American presence. Imported fertilizers were hoarded to increase prices. Trafficking in jobs with opportunity for making money was rife. Passports were sold and real estate manipulated to enrich senior military officers. Theft from American supply chains including military supplies supplied a vigorous black market.³¹⁴

Thieu's re-election

Thieu had begun his campaign with the victory parade for Lam Son 719, although the law prohibited campaigning until a month before the elections. As his previous victory with Ky that had achieved only 35% of the vote was disregarded both by many South Vietnamese and by Americans seeking evidence of democratic government, he needed a resounding electoral victory to establish his presidential credentials. By July, Thieu's putative rivals for presidential election were alleging that the October election had been shamelessly rigged.

Ky had offered to run again with Thieu, but Thieu had ignored him and announced Tran Van Huong, whom he had ousted for his honesty, as his vice-presidential running mate.³¹⁵ Thieu's secret polls reported that 60% of the military backed Ky against his only 25% support.³¹⁶ He chose this time to hand out dozens of promotions.³¹⁷ Returned ex-General "Big" Minh agreed that there was some truth in Ky's accusations that Thieu had an excessive attachment to power and accused the American Embassy of masterminding the election despite its professed neutrality. Minh campaigned as a peace candidate, but threatened to withdraw if the Americans could not counter Thieu's immense inherent advantages. Himself accused of complicity in the Diem assassination, Minh defended himself by saying he had agreed to give Diem and Nhu safe

³¹⁴ Karnow, pp.441, 442.

³¹⁵ Prados, p.439.

³¹⁶ "The Mudslingers", Newsweek, 2 Aug 1971, p.38.

³¹⁷ Prados, p.440.

conduct into exile, but that the troops surrounding the presidential palace had detained and killed them, troops commanded by Nguyen Van Thieu. Thieu called a press conference to accuse Minh of slander. Minh refused to back down.³¹⁸

US Ambassador Bunker offered Minh \$3 million if he would stay in the presidential race.³¹⁹ Bunker told Thieu the United States Congress could balk at continuing aid if he ran unopposed. There was no guarantee either Ky or Minh could have defeated Thieu, whose loyal army and police were increasingly capable of mobilizing votes for him.³²⁰

Minh then released a 17-page memo from Thieu to province chiefs telling them how to fix ballot cards to enable his supporters to vote twice, and how to blackmail Thieu's opponents from voting. In early August the Supreme Court ruled that Ky could not run because his petition included names of councillors who had already endorsed Thieu.³²¹ Ky later claimed that many members had preferred him but Thieu had passed a law giving him power to arbitrarily dismiss them that made them uncomfortable.³²² After the An Quang monks had insisted Minh withdraw or lose their support,³²³ he withdrew from the presidential race, charging that the election was a "disgusting farce", blatantly rigged by Thieu.³²⁴ He declared that the minimum requirements for a fair election were a halt to seizure and suppression of South Vietnamese newspapers, prohibition of arrest of opposition campaign workers and no switching of ballot boxes.³²⁵

Nixon was becoming determined to end the increasingly unpopular war. In May Kissinger offered a specific deadline for withdrawal of US forces tied to release of American prisoners,

³¹⁸ "The Mudslingers", Newsweek, 2 Aug 1971, p.38.

³¹⁹ Snepp, p.11.

³²⁰ Karnow, p.636.

³²¹ Kirk, p.617.

³²² Ky, Twenty Years, p.193.

³²³ Kirk, p.618.

³²⁴ "Still a Thieu-Way Race in South Viet Nam", Time, 30 Aug 1970.

³²⁵ Prados, p.441.

with a ceasefire separate from an overall political settlement. Hanoi rejected the offer, which was described to Thieu as including “eventual withdrawal of all foreign troops from Indo-China.”³²⁶

In August Kissinger offered complete withdrawal of American and allied forces within nine months of an agreement.³²⁷ Kissinger told Nixon that he and the DRV negotiators had reached agreement on eight of nine points. The only remaining point was the DRV insistence on Thieu’s overthrow.³²⁸

In mid- September Ambassador Bunker presented Thieu with the outline of the new diplomatic initiative. This was the first time that Thieu learned that the United States would settle for a military settlement only; a ceasefire, American troop withdrawal and return of American prisoners.³²⁹ He opposed the standstill ceasefire replacing a mutual withdrawal of troops that would have DRV troops withdrawn from the south as American troops were withdrawn, and raised a plethora of questions and objections.³³⁰ He then gave a speech connecting a cease-fire to withdrawal of all foreign troops.³³¹

The NLF responded with an eight-point peace plan that linked the release of American prisoners of war with American troop withdrawal. The NLF pressed for unconditional withdrawal of American troops with a timetable, and removal of Thieu, Ky and Khiem. However, Nixon continued his support for Thieu, telling Kissinger that Thieu was the only person on whom to build a peace settlement. “When you come down to it, what’s the alternative

³²⁶ U.S. Department of State, Saigon Backchannel Cable 0144, Bunker-Kissinger, 3 June 1971, GRFL, GRFP, NSAF, NSC Convenience File, Embassy Saigon Series, Box 1, Folder “Saigon to Washington, 15/12/69 -16/12/71.” Quoted in Prados, p.445.

³²⁷ Nixon, p.583.

³²⁸ “We have conceded everything remotely reasonable, short of a coup against Thieu – neutrality, limitation on military aid, a withdrawal deadline, a large economic aid program. Also, a record of willingness to take steps and make efforts greater than those demanded by our domestic opposition ... I told them that we were prepared in the next five years to provide \$7.5 billion in aid to Indochina, of which \$2-2.5 billion could go to North Vietnam.” Kissinger cabled Nixon. Berman, p.110.

³²⁹ Berman, p.111.

³³⁰ Berman, p.77.

³³¹ Prados, p.445.

to Thieu? There's no other leader. The only alternative is a Communist government."³³²

Kissinger later wrote that, "We failed early enough to grasp that Thieu's real objection was not to terms but to the fact of any compromise." Thieu was not prepared to accept "any terms less than Hanoi's total surrender."³³³ As the election approached Thieu grandiosely declared that a blank ballot would be counted as a vote against his continued political dominance, but many village voters feared the consequences of voting against him.³³⁴ His blatant interference in the political process so annoyed Ambassador Bunker that he urged Nixon to publicly disassociate himself from Thieu and privately force him to accept a contested election.³³⁵ After Ambassador Bunker had insisted on appearance of a fair contest the South Vietnam Supreme Court ruled that Ky could qualify for the ballot after all.³³⁶ According to Ky, Bunker offered him \$2 million if he would stand.³³⁷

However, Ky called for a three-month postponement of the election and for both he and Thieu to resign, with Nguyen Van Huyen to be appointed Acting President to organise the election.³³⁸ Ky even implied that he would lead a coup against Thieu if Thieu did not acquiesce.³³⁹ The United States rebuffed his request for them to interfere. The State Department had advocated strict neutrality but the White House still insisted on supporting Thieu.³⁴⁰

Three days before the election Thieu gratuitously announced that if peace was achieved he would "return to the life of a common citizen."³⁴¹ He declared the election a referendum on his

³³² Berman, p.98.

³³³ H. Kissinger, The White House Years, London, 1979, p.1393.

³³⁴ G. Emerson, "Vietnam Voters Fear to Abstain", The New York Times, 26 September, 1971.

³³⁵ Herring, p.270.

³³⁶ A. Shuster, "The Miscalculations in Saigon", The New York Times, 27 August 1971. Kirk, p.618.

³³⁷ Ky told the Americans that Thieu had too tight a grip to allow him to succeed. Ky, Twenty Years, pp.194, 195. Ky, Buddha's Child, p.318.

³³⁸ A. Shuster, "Thieu Says Nation Will Vote Oct. 3 According to Plan", The New York Times, 29 August, 1971.

³³⁹ Kirk, p.619.

³⁴⁰ Kissinger, White House Years, p.1035. Prados, p.441.

³⁴¹ A Shuster, "The Outlook for Thieu: Still Bigger Worries", The New York Times, 1 Oct 1971.

leadership and promised to resign if he received less than half the votes, but he was so confident that he hosted a lunch for California Governor Ronald Reagan the day before the election rather than campaign.³⁴² After severely constraining free speech and assembly, censoring and closing most newspapers and harassing opponents,³⁴³ and ordering national police to “shoot to kill” those who set fire to property or merely “upset the people’s normal life”, the one-man election proceeded.³⁴⁴ Thieu was re-elected, supposedly with an astounding 94% of an 87% voter turnout.³⁴⁵

Secret negotiations

U.S. General Alexander Haig met Thieu in Saigon and reassured him that political stability, unity and strength were paramount. Haig urged Thieu to increase combat pay and fill combat units, advising summary removal of inefficient divisional and regimental commanders who were sapping the morale of troops.³⁴⁶ President Nixon wanted Thieu to know that the only obstacle to a peace settlement remaining was Thieu’s removal, which the United States would not permit. However, Nixon had decided to submit a new negotiating proposal he did not think Hanoi would accept but which would silence American critics by demonstrating that Thieu had gone the last mile for peace. Under this proposal Thieu would resign and an electoral commission would oversee a new election. Thieu would be allowed to run in presidential elections after settlement.³⁴⁷

By this time Nixon seemed prepared to accept an end to the war that did not abandon the south to an immediate communist takeover.³⁴⁸ If Thieu accepted the proposal Nixon would defer

³⁴² Prados, p.441.

³⁴³ Kirk, p.622.

³⁴⁴ Kirk, p.623.

³⁴⁵ Prados, p.442

³⁴⁶ A. Haig with C. McCarry, Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, N.Y., 1992, p.279.

³⁴⁷ Berman, p.114. Nixon, p.584.

³⁴⁸ Ambrose, p.387.

a dramatic troop withdrawal announcement.³⁴⁹ Thieu eventually gave his approval for the new negotiating initiative but Kissinger later observed that Thieu's acquiescence proved a pretext. A year later Thieu told the Americans he had been deeply offended, although according to Kissinger, "he never gave us a hint of it at the time."³⁵⁰

Kissinger resumed the secret talks with the DRV, proposing elections within 60 days after a cease-fire, and Thieu's withdrawal a month in advance. The offer was unacceptable because it did not guarantee that Thieu would not be a candidate or be prevented from using the machinery of government to rig the election, and talks broke down because neither side was yet willing to make meaningful concessions.³⁵¹

Publication of the Pentagon Papers had begun in September, and would soon further undermine support for American participation in the war. However, after vanquishing the broad spectrum of his opposition from students and war veterans to Buddhist monks and conservative generals, Thieu had achieved recognized and actual political dominance.³⁵² Merely by achieving political success had become considered political manifestation of the 'will of heaven' by many in the predominantly Buddhist and Confucian political domain. His military was equipped with modern American arms and supported by American air power so that it was capable of at least maintaining internal security over much of South Vietnam. American aid and increased rice yields from the Mekong delta were staving off starvation, crippling inflation and decreasing unemployment.³⁵³

Ambassador Bunker and CIA Station Chief Ted Shackley manipulated and penetrated Thieu's

³⁴⁹ Berman, pp.98, 99.

³⁵⁰ Berman, p.114.

³⁵¹ Herring, p.270.

³⁵² Kirk, p.610.

³⁵³ Kirk, pp.610, 611.

government and stymied his political opponents, to continue his political dominance.³⁵⁴ Pro-Thieu politicians continued to dominate the National Assembly after the election. Able to maintain power by ensuring that he had continued American support Thieu only had to avoid another coup.³⁵⁵ Fearing a coup similar to that that had overthrown Diem, his primary purpose was to keep the Americans happy.³⁵⁶ Ky later described how Thieu managed the American relationship. He agreed to whatever the Americans suggested, but then did nothing.³⁵⁷

Nixon began steps to isolate the DRV from Chinese and Soviet support, gambling that overtures to China and the Soviet Union could yet bring progress to global peace that would bring the DRV to negotiate, and guarantee Nixon's 1972 re-election.³⁵⁸ However, at the end of 1971 there were still c.156,800 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam, while ARVN strength exceeded a million.

On 10 January 1972 Ambassador Bunker told Thieu that the DRV had been told in October that Thieu had agreed to step down a month before the proposed elections, although Thieu had understood that as a proposed Kissinger-Le Duc Tho meeting had been cancelled the proposal had not been forwarded and he had consequently not effectively agreed.³⁵⁹ Thieu then warned Nixon that he had serious concerns on peace negotiations and unless they were addressed he would announce new peace initiatives combined with his hardline of July 1969. Nixon delayed a forthcoming speech and attempted to persuade Thieu to a common position, stressing that he wanted to prevent damaging congressional resolutions that could force the United States out of the war. He wrote to Thieu again reminding him, "We could have reached agreement last

³⁵⁴ Snapp, p.19.

³⁵⁵ Hosmer, Kellen, Jenkins, p.63.

³⁵⁶ Ky, *Buddha's Child*, p.291.

³⁵⁷ Ky, *Twenty Years*, p.207.

³⁵⁸ Herring, p.270.

³⁵⁹ Berman, pp.114, 115.

summer by agreeing to overthrow you. Our refusal to do so – which we will maintain firmly in any event – was the only stumbling block to a settlement.”³⁶⁰

In February 1972, Nixon visited China as part of his geopolitical strategy to integrate China into the world and enhance the divide of the communist bloc already evident, and as a chance to end the war in South Vietnam without accepting displacing Thieu.³⁶¹ Chou Enlai told Nixon that China’s role persuading the DRV to a settlement was limited.³⁶² In February the DRV stated that American PoWs would not be released until the United States withdrew support from the Thieu regime. Thieu’s immediate resignation was now the principal condition the DRV and the NLF imposed for a settlement.³⁶³ However, realizing that they were not persuading the Americans to get rid of Thieu, the Communists decided to pour forces into the south so that they would be strategically deployed when they obtained a cease-fire in place.³⁶⁴

In March 1972 PAVN troops crossed the demilitarised zone to launch the largest offensive of the war since 1968. They quickly overran Quang Tri province, gambling that domestic political pressures would prevent Nixon from reversing the withdrawal process to effectively oppose them. Instead of guerrilla warfare, a new strategy deploying Soviet-supplied armour, artillery and antiaircraft weapons enabled occupation of base areas in the north and along the borders.³⁶⁵ By the first day of April the Third Division of the ARVN was in retreat. One regiment stripped off their military regalia to join the civilian exodus and another bartered their lives by surrendering artillery cannon.³⁶⁶ After Quang Tri was lost General Abrams warned Kissinger that the ARVN

³⁶⁰ Berman, p.117.

³⁶¹ Hersh, p.489.

³⁶² Berman, p.122. Le Duan told Chou much the same thing, that China and the U.S. had no right to discuss Vietnam. Chang & Halliday, p.711.

³⁶³ T. Szulc, “Hanoi Says P.O.W.’s Will Not Be Freed Until War is Over”, The New York Times, 7 February, 1972, p.1.

³⁶⁴ Berman, p.123.

³⁶⁵ Parker, p.361.

³⁶⁶ Perlstein, p.646.

may have lost their will to fight, and, "the whole thing may be lost."³⁶⁷ However, after the communists opened a second front close to Saigon, Nixon authorized bombing within 25 miles of the DMZ. Two weeks later he authorized bombing of areas near Hanoi and Haiphong. The Paris talks were suspended.

Nixon realised that the Saigon regime was the weak link in the war effort. "The enemy is willing to sacrifice in order to win, while the South Vietnamese simply aren't willing to pay that much of a price in order to avoid losing."³⁶⁸ Facing invasion spearheaded with Soviet-supplied tanks, Thieu could only have been amazed when he was told that Nixon planned to announce withdrawal of another 20,000 troops by 1 July. He was supposedly confident that the ARVN had defeated the invasion and was now stronger than the NVA and NLF in the south.³⁶⁹ Kissinger indicated to Tho in a secret meeting that the United States was prepared to drop insistence on withdrawal of northern troops from the south. The DRV continued to insist on the removal of Thieu.³⁷⁰

Determined to signal to Thieu that the United States was committed to protecting the idea of South Vietnam and to demonstrate to the Communists that he was prepared to undertake tough military action, Nixon decided on more definitive military action.³⁷¹ He convened a National Security Council meeting and described plans for mining Haiphong harbour and resuming bombing of Hanoi-Haiphong, returning to the strategy of the abandoned Operation Duck Hook with B-52s.³⁷² He addressed the nation on television to announce the offensive and a new peace initiative, proposing return of all American PoWs, and an internationally supervised ceasefire

³⁶⁷ Berman, p.126.

³⁶⁸ Karnow, p.642.

³⁶⁹ Haig, p.292.

³⁷⁰ Berman, p.128

³⁷¹ Conversation between President Nixon and Assistant for National Security Affairs Kissinger, Washington, 5 May, 1972, on NixonTapes, <http://nixon tapes.org/>

³⁷² Berman, p.130.

throughout Indochina to be followed by complete withdrawal of American forces within four months. From April to October 1972 Operation Linebacker dropped 155,548 tons of bombs on the DRV,³⁷³ seriously disrupting and damaging lines of communications and constraining supply flows along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³⁷⁴

Thieu became convinced that the DRV could not overwhelm the south while he had American air support.³⁷⁵ There were only 47,000 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam in June when five men were arrested in Washington DC for breaking into the Democratic National Committee offices at the Watergate complex.

In South Vietnam a Soldiers' Saving Fund managed mandatory contributions of South Vietnamese soldiers, but money was being skimmed and invested in businesses controlled by the military elite. In June 1972 Special Assistant to the Vice-President to fight corruption General Nguyen Van Hieu traced the embezzlement to Generals Tran Thien Khiem and Dang Van Quang, Thieu's Assistant for National Security. Thieu eventually responded by firing a lesser figure, Defence Minister General Nguyen Van Vy, and seven others, replacing Vy with Khiem, who became Defence Minister, Prime Minister and pacification chief. When General Hieu persisted with his investigations against Khiem and Quang, and Co Ban Vien, and perhaps Thieu himself, he was transferred to the operations staff of Third Corps.³⁷⁶

Peace Talks Breakthrough

There had been a cooling of relations between China and the DRV after China had withdrawn its last troops in 1969.³⁷⁷ However, they were still allies. In July Le Duc Tho went to Beijing for

³⁷³ M. Clodfelter, Limits of Air Power, N.Y., 1989, pp.166.

³⁷⁴ Polling revealed that the American public overwhelming approved of the bombing campaign to guarantee survival of a viable South Vietnam after the American withdrawal. Berman, pp.132, 133.

³⁷⁵ Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War, p.301.

³⁷⁶ Prados, p.342.

³⁷⁷ Prados, p.446.

discussions with Chinese Prime Minister Zhou En-lai. Zhou pressed Tho to accept the American terms, including retaining Thieu. However, Tho resisted. Zhou asked who else would be acceptable and Tho replied the DRV was willing to talk with anyone else. Zhou replied that could continue Thieu's policy without him but Le Duc Tho continued to refuse to accept Thieu's presence in government.³⁷⁸

The secret talks had continued but made scant progress. By early August Nixon and Kissinger had decided they only needed to prevent the DRV overrunning the south until the US presidential elections, persuade Thieu that the United States would support his regime by their massive military intervention and obtain his agreement to a peace agreement they could take to the election.³⁷⁹ The DRV was becoming anxious for peace, as the 'Linebacker' bombing had inflicted serious damage and their policy of playing the Soviet Union off against China for assistance was beginning to be unproductive. The DRV leadership soon also concluded that George McGovern could not win the upcoming election, and decided they might get better terms from Nixon before the election.³⁸⁰

Kissinger met with Le Duc Tho in August and accepted a tripartite electoral commission composed of the Saigon regime, the PRG and the neutralists to arrange a settlement after a ceasefire. Kissinger had obtained an agreement from Nixon that if he could obtain DRV agreement he could go to Saigon and sell it to Thieu. Nixon had said that in that case Kissinger should "cram it down [Thieu's] throat."³⁸¹ Kissinger went to Saigon on 17 August to persuade Thieu to compromise.

³⁷⁸ 77 Conversations, quoted in Berman, p.136.

³⁷⁹ Perlstein, p.708.

³⁸⁰ The assassination attempt that had removed George Wallace from the race had relieved Nixon of concern for his re-election. Herring, p.276. Haig, p.293.

³⁸¹ Kissinger, White House Years, pp.1339-1340.

Operation Linebacker had contributed to the DRV's preparedness to settle on Nixon's terms, but the bombing success had also stiffened Thieu's opposition to an agreement by convincing him he could still gain total victory.³⁸² Kissinger soon discovered that Thieu was self-confident after comparative failure of the spring offensive.³⁸³ Ambassador Bunker told Kissinger Thieu seemed "genuinely afraid of peace."³⁸⁴ Thieu had only made previous concessions for continued American support. He believed that his continued refusal of a coalition government with the communists offered a safe haven from the risks of negotiation and defending South Vietnam without American support.³⁸⁵

Kissinger made some extravagant promises.³⁸⁶ He told Thieu that while the United States was prepared to have a ceasefire, "We believe it would be better not to have one." Kissinger presented a strategy to draw the talks out until after the November elections. He told Thieu that after the election, "We will step up our air campaign and force a resolution ... If we win the election we will settle the war one way or another."³⁸⁷ He suggested that Thieu start planning an invasion of North Vietnam after the elections, something Thieu had been urging since March 1971.³⁸⁸ Thieu responded the next day by rejecting any political commission that could evolve into a coalition government and asking how the agreement would force the DRV to withdraw. Kissinger suggested that Thieu's cooperation could ensure offensives against the DRV after the election.³⁸⁹

³⁸² Berman, p.134.

³⁸³ Ambrose, p.594.

³⁸⁴ Kissinger, White House Years, p.1320.

³⁸⁵ Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War, pp.301, 302.

³⁸⁶ Szulc, p.612.

³⁸⁷ White House, NSC, Memorandum of conversation, Kissinger-Thieu et al., 18 Aug 1972, 10.00 am- 1.30 pm, 25. NARA, NLP, NSC Records AI Haig Special file, Box 1021, Folder "Kissinger and Haig Memcons with Thieu [4 of 4]. in Prados, p.503.

³⁸⁸ Szulc, p.612. Hung & Schechter, p.67.

³⁸⁹ Berman, p.145.

Kissinger eventually told Thieu, “This is the position you will agree to.”³⁹⁰ Nixon simultaneously attempted to reassure Thieu, writing that the United States wouldn’t purchase peace by deserting a brave ally.³⁹¹ Kissinger had come to believe that Thieu was not ready for a negotiated peace, preferring to continue the military contest rather than face a political struggle. He complained to Bunker that Thieu was attempting to bog down negotiations in minor technicalities.³⁹² Bunker suggested that a political struggle after a settlement might be unfair as the communists were more organised. On 28 August Thieu rejected US-DRV talks as a valid forum to discuss political issues, insisting any change of the South Vietnam government was unacceptable, DRV withdrawal was mandatory, and equivocating on a possible resignation before a referendum for a new constitution. Haig visited Thieu to check on progress and Thieu again attempted to slow the peace momentum, asking about his previous objections and raising new ones. Haig outlined a series of proposals Kissinger intended to put in Paris. He told Thieu that DRV proposals could be manipulated to keep him in power. Thieu tearfully claimed Kissinger had been ambushed by the North Vietnamese, and that the DRV had done nothing in return for cessation of Linebacker.³⁹³

He then told the National Assembly, “A political solution is the domestic affair of the South. It is a right and responsibility of the southern people to settle it among their selves... Only the present government is competent to discuss and approve any domestic political solution for the South, and no one has the right to do it in its place.”³⁹⁴ He attempted to construct an alternative from his proposition for a comprehensive agreement to encompass all the nations of Indochina,

³⁹⁰ Hung & Schechter, p.67.

³⁹¹ Hung & Schechter, p.68.

³⁹² Berman, p.144

³⁹³ Berman, p.150. Haig, pp.294, 295

³⁹⁴ Baltimore Sun, 29.9, 1972 quoted in Willbanks, p.167, 168.

to propose an international conference of Asian nations that would have returned the dialogue to first principles and marginalized the United States.³⁹⁵

Not wanting to take the war as baggage into the election campaign Nixon was telling the press the war would soon be over. He remarked to Kissinger “And we’re just going to have to break it off with him [Thieu] after the election, I can see that. You know, if he’s going to be this unreasonable, I mean the tail can’t wag the dog.”³⁹⁶ After Nixon and Kissinger had agreed that Thieu’s demands would have broken up the talks, causing domestic political turmoil, Kissinger tabled a proposal on 26 September that bore little resemblance to Thieu’s hard line counterproposal.³⁹⁷

Thieu told Haig that he wished to be an independent party in the talks and that the United States and the DRV could not settle the affairs of South Vietnam. He questioned whether the United States still wanted to defend Southeast Asia. “No one demands that anyone in the DRV step down,” he complained.³⁹⁸ Kissinger denounced Thieu’s demands as preposterous and urged Nixon to proceed without Saigon’s approval.

On 6 October Nixon sent Thieu a warning that there could be no public confrontation between them, threatening that, “our only option in that event would be a unilateral disengagement”, and with a coup; “I would urge you to take every measure to avoid the development of an atmosphere which could lead to events similar to those which we abhorred in 1963 and which I personally opposed so vehemently in 1968.”³⁹⁹ Nixon had begun to suppose that with his re-election virtually certain he should not be pressured into an agreement.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁵ Prados, p.506.

³⁹⁶ Ambrose, p.613.

³⁹⁷ Berman, p.151.

³⁹⁸ Berman, pp.152, 153.

³⁹⁹ Berman, p.153.

⁴⁰⁰ Nixon, p.693.

He had told aide Charles Colson to tell Kissinger, “[I]t will hurt - not help us – to get the settlement before the election.”⁴⁰¹ The electorate would be more inclined to vote Democrat if peace eventuated. Increasingly confident of re-election, Nixon supposed he could then support Thieu through the next four years and in a worst case could resume bombing after the US elections.

On 9 October Kissinger sat down for another session of secret talks with Le Duc Tho in Paris. However, he still wanted an end to the war. The DRV proposed an *Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam*, reiterating major points already made and concessions by the United States including nonwithdrawal of DRV troops from the south.⁴⁰² However, they finally dropped insistence on deposing Thieu, accepting an in principle ceasefire that would leave him temporarily in power but also grant the PRG status as a political entity in the south.⁴⁰³

Le Duc Tho’s concession came as a surprise to NLF leaders who had insisted on Thieu’s removal since 1968. More closely acquainted with Thieu’s regime, the southerners still vigorously objected to Thieu being left in control of the political apparatus and also objected to severance of the link between American PoWs and the many political prisoners in the south.⁴⁰⁴ While the DRV’s acceptance of Thieu’s continuance in power signalled how much the North Vietnamese wanted an agreement the communists were beginning to believe that the United States would not further intervene on Thieu’s behalf.⁴⁰⁵ The United States would settle for a ceasefire in place for return of PoWs and removal of military combat forces and equipment.

Having accepted the principle of three zones in the south Kissinger cabled Bunker “to request

⁴⁰¹ Hersh, *Price of Power*, pp.581, 582.

⁴⁰² Berman, p.156.

⁴⁰³ Herring, p.276.

⁴⁰⁴ Berman, p.176.

⁴⁰⁵ Hess, p.201. Nixon wrote that serious negotiations began when they dropped the insistence on Thieu’s resignation. Nixon, p.349. He claimed the DRV was accepting a settlement on American terms by this concession. Nixon, p.692.

Thieu to exert the greatest efforts to encroach on the PRG-controlled areas, as much as possible”, as the land they could capture would be controlled under the standstill ceasefire.⁴⁰⁶ Kissinger told Nixon of the breakthrough that would leave Thieu in office and so be acceptable to South Vietnam. Nixon was pleasantly surprised, and thought the idea of United States assistance to Vietnam after settlement to be most significant as a rejection of communist principles.⁴⁰⁷

A few days later he was having second thoughts, suspecting Kissinger was attempting to rush an agreement to be able to claim credit for his re-election. or the settlement his re-election was forcing on the Communists.⁴⁰⁸ Knowing that c.120,000 DRV troops were still in the south Nixon had persuaded himself to empathize with Thieu’s position.⁴⁰⁹

Anyway, Thieu still remained an obstacle to peace. Bunker cabled on 13 October that Thieu might hold out for better terms after the election as he had in 1968, thinking that a re-elected Nixon would be tougher on the DRV.⁴¹⁰ Nixon ordered expedited shipments of additional military equipment to arrive in South Vietnam before November under Operation Enhance.⁴¹¹ He wrote to Thieu on 17 October pointing out that Thieu’s government, armed forces and political institutions would remain intact under the proposed treaty.⁴¹² He told Kissinger to convince Thieu to accept the agreement, but gently. “Thieu’s acceptance must be wholehearted so that the charge cannot be made that we forced him into a settlement ... It cannot be a shotgun wedding.”⁴¹³

On 17 October however, Thieu received a captured enemy document titled, “General Instructions for a Cease-Fire”, encouraging occupation of territory by the Communists in

⁴⁰⁶ Berman, p.158.

⁴⁰⁷ Haldeman, p.516. (12 Oct, 1972). Nixon, p.692.

⁴⁰⁸ Herring, p.277. Berman, p.158. Karnow, p.648.

⁴⁰⁹ Nixon, p.690.

⁴¹⁰ Berman, p.160.

⁴¹¹ Karnow, p.648.

⁴¹² Berman, p.161.

⁴¹³ Quoted in Isaccson, Kissinger, p.454.

anticipation of standstill ceasefire.⁴¹⁴ Meanwhile, Nixon cabled DRV Premier Pham Van Dong saying that the agreement could be considered complete.⁴¹⁵ DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong told journalist Arnaud de Borchgrave he considered the proposed National Council of Reconciliation and Concord a three-sided coalition.”⁴¹⁶

On 21 October Kissinger supposed he still had opportunity of eliciting an understanding with Saigon.⁴¹⁷ However, he soon discovered the South Vietnamese vigorously resisting the agreement, demanding the changes Thieu had earlier insisted, identifying 64 objections. After meeting with Thieu, Kissinger telephoned Haig, to tell him Thieu had “rejected the entire plan or any modification of it and refuses to discuss any further negotiations on the basis of it.”⁴¹⁸

Thieu described the agreement as worse than the 1954 Geneva Accords and claimed that if they knew what was proposed the South Vietnamese people would assume that their country had been sold out by the United States. Kissinger told Thieu that he did not know how the US administration, “could justify to Congress what it is we are fighting for.” Thieu retorted that, “If we accept the document as it stands we will commit suicide – and I will be committing suicide,” and refused to sign.⁴¹⁹

Kissinger cabled Haig on 22 October, “It is hard to exaggerate the toughness of Thieu’s position. His demands verge on insanity.”⁴²⁰ The idea of a coup was again floated in the White House but Nixon claimed that Thieu’s removal could precipitate a communist takeover of Southeast Asia.⁴²¹ He decided that Thieu would acquiesce when he realized that Congress might

⁴¹⁴ The ARVN had finally retaken Quang Tri city in September. They seized a document instructing from Hanoi to explain the cease-fire agreements to cadres after Tho had presented Kissinger with the ‘breakthrough’ draft peace plan.

⁴¹⁵ Nixon, p.695.

⁴¹⁶ Willbanks, pp.170, 171.

⁴¹⁷ Kissinger, *Ending The Vietnam War*, p.388.

⁴¹⁸ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.364.

⁴¹⁹ Berman, pp.167-169.

⁴²⁰ Berman, p.170.

⁴²¹ Hersh, p.275.

cut off his aid.⁴²²

At Kissinger's recommendation Nixon scaled back the Linebacker bombings restricting them to south of the 20th parallel.⁴²³ Nixon later claimed he cabled Thieu suggesting that his obstruction could have serious consequences for continued American support.⁴²⁴ Thieu accused envoys Haig and Kissinger of organising a coup against him.⁴²⁵

He told Haig to call in Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin to tell him Pham Van Dong had wrecked the possibility of agreement with his statement to an American journalist that a draft agreement provided for a coalition government in Saigon and reparations for the DRV.⁴²⁶ Thieu publicly denounced the bombing reduction and the draft treaty. Kissinger had pleaded with Thieu not to reveal the tone and content of their discussions, but on 24 October Thieu addressed the South Vietnamese for two hours on television, in an unusually informal and folksy manner, closing with a prediction that a coalition government would precipitate the slaughter of as many as five million people in the south.⁴²⁷

On 26 October the North Vietnamese published the preliminary understandings reached in Paris. Thieu protested in the American press that he had not been consulted in advance and had only learned of the negotiations from captured NLF documents. He insisted that he would never accept DRV troops remaining in the south and NLF sovereignty, and demanded wholesale changes in the text and establishment of the demilitarised zone as boundary between two states.⁴²⁸ Nixon had approved the draft agreement on condition of Thieu's approval, but

⁴²² Karnow, p.651.

⁴²³ Willbanks, p.172.

⁴²⁴ Nixon, pp.698, 699.

⁴²⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.1380.

⁴²⁶ Haig, p.301. On 1 February 1973 Nixon wrote to Pham Van Dong offering more than \$3 billion for postwar reconstruction. However, in late June the House of Representatives prohibited use of funds for such a purpose unless authorized by Congress. G. Porter (ed.), *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, N.Y.1981, p.469, 470.

⁴²⁷ Berman, pp.171, 172.

⁴²⁸ "Thieu, Now a Desperate Battle for Survival", *The New York Times*, 29 Oct 1972.

increasingly certain of an “enormous mandate” in the 1972 elections, he began to assume that after the election he would be in a position to demand the DRV make a settlement or “face the consequences of what we would do to them.”⁴²⁹ Any delay would enable him to strengthen South Vietnam while the DRV was further weakened. In late October Kissinger proclaimed that “peace is at hand”, perhaps to press to that outcome or perhaps to constrain Thieu to accept the agreement after the election.⁴³⁰ Thieu denounced the draft treaty as “humiliating... a surrender.”⁴³¹

Nixon was unsure if he wanted Thieu to agree or not.⁴³² His continued support for Thieu’s hard line eventually ensured the breakdown of the October agreement.⁴³³ On 27 October Thieu declared that South Vietnam could not be bound by any peace agreement he did not sign. Despite his persistent sympathy for Thieu’s position Nixon wrote to him on 29 October that, “If the evident drift towards disagreement between the two of us continues ... the essential base for U.S. support for you and your government will be destroyed.”⁴³⁴ In early November Nixon described Thieu’s behaviour as “infuriating”, but he still believed that South Vietnam would fall to the Communists within months if the United States abandoned him.⁴³⁵

Thieu continued to insist that any armistice should include formal recognition of South Vietnam as a separate state, of the 17th parallel as a border and withdrawal of all DRV troops from the south, as if the Nixon Administration would never end support. Nixon reinforced his obstinate attitude with implementation of the Enhance program to replace weapons and equipment lost by the RVNAF during the Easter Offensive. On a campaign speech on 2

⁴²⁹ Nixon, p.701.

⁴³⁰ Berman, p.174.

⁴³¹ **Baltimore Sun 29 Oct 1972**, in Willbanks, p.173.

⁴³² Ambrose, p.635.

⁴³³ Herring, p.278.

⁴³⁴ Hung & Schechter, p.113-115.

⁴³⁵ Nixon, p.701.

November Nixon insisted that he wasn't going to be forced into an agreement by an election deadline.⁴³⁶ Democrat presidential candidate George McGovern charged deception and that Thieu was obstructing, but Nixon put out information that there had been fundamental agreement but details needed to be nailed down.⁴³⁷

The American people went to the November elections convinced that the administration had achieved an honourable peace.⁴³⁸ Nixon defeated McGovern in the biggest presidential landslide since 1936, and convinced he had authority to enforce a peace in Vietnam.

Nixon re-elected

Nixon was re-elected with the largest number of popular and Electoral College votes ever, although the Democrats retained control of both the House and Senate. Nixon intensified his efforts to win over Thieu. The Pentagon began implementing Operation Enhance Plus, continuing the earlier Enhance program.⁴³⁹ Materiel was diverted from American aid recipients such as Taiwan, South Korea and the Philippines to bolster the regime's strength before an agreement.⁴⁴⁰ Delivery of \$1 billion of military hardware among other resources gave Thieu the fourth largest air force in the world.⁴⁴¹

Nixon sent Haig with a letter to Thieu commending the agreement and objecting to Thieu's, "continuous distortions of the agreement and attacks upon it." He warned Thieu, "We are in any event resolved to proceed on the basis of the draft agreement and the modifications we are determined to obtain from the North Vietnamese." He informed Thieu that pursuing his

⁴³⁶ B. Gwertzman, "Nixon Bars Truce for Vietnam War until Pact is Right", The New York Times, 3 Nov, 1972, Willbanks, p.173.

⁴³⁷ Conversation No. 33-4, 8.40-8.45, 4 November 1972, White House Telephone between President Nixon and Ronald L Ziegler, on NixonTapes, <http://nixon tapes.org/>

⁴³⁸ Addington, p.146.

⁴³⁹ Willbanks, p.173.

⁴⁴⁰ Karnow, p.649.

⁴⁴¹ Herring, p.279.

recalcitrance would be a disaster for him.⁴⁴² Haig informed Thieu that the new Senate was probably more against the war, and if Thieu was perceived as an obstacle to peace Congress would cut off funding to South Vietnam.⁴⁴³

Thieu replied to Nixon's letter arguing that he had merely been drawing attention to facts. He then asked Nixon to reconsider his position, claiming there could never be a free election in the south while the DRV occupied territory there.⁴⁴⁴ Nixon assured Thieu that if the DRV refused to abide by the agreement, "it is my intention to take swift and severe retaliatory action."⁴⁴⁵ Nixon also instructed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to begin planning for such a contingency.⁴⁴⁶ However, even Nixon was not prepared to continue to support Thieu's fantastic anti-communist crusade.

American commitment to the Thieu regime had been fatally compromised. Nixon separately told both Haig and Kissinger that 8 December was the final date for an accord that could be completed before Congress returned. He began to plan to make a separate peace if Thieu would not cooperate.⁴⁴⁷ On 18 November Nixon told White House Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman that he had instructed Kissinger to get the best deal possible "and then let Thieu paddle his own canoe."⁴⁴⁸

Confronted by Thieu's continued intransigence Nixon and Kissinger had shifted blame for their concessions by demanding Hanoi agree to changes in an agreement they had already

⁴⁴² White House letter, Richard M. Nixon - Nguyen Van Thieu, 8 November, 1972, reproduced in Hung & Schechter, pp.383-384.

⁴⁴³ Berman, p.185

⁴⁴⁴ Berman, p.186.

⁴⁴⁵ Nixon, p.718. White House letter, Richard M. Nixon - Nguyen Van Thieu, 14 November, 1972, reproduced in Hung & Schechter, pp.385-386.

⁴⁴⁶ White House letter, Richard M. Nixon-Nguyen Van Thieu, 14 November, 1972, reproduced in Hung and Schechter, pp.385, 386.

⁴⁴⁷ Nixon, p.719.

⁴⁴⁸ R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*, N.Y., 1994, p. 538. (18 Nov, 1972) "We're just going to have to, in my opinion, then say to Thieu, "This is it. If you don't want to go, fine. Then we, we'll make our own deal and you'll have to paddle your own canoe." Conversation No. 33-98, 12.32-12.44 pm 18 November 1972, White House Telephone, President Nixon told H.R. Haldeman, on NixonTapes, <http://nixon tapes.org/>.

accepted. Kissinger had had to return to Paris to insist on a token withdrawal of DRV troops and changes to weaken the political status of the NLF, restriction of powers of the trilateral commission and establishment of the demilitarised zone as a virtual boundary, warning that Nixon would be empowered by the imminent re-election.⁴⁴⁹ Nixon himself had admitted the task was nearly impossible. Kissinger, “had not only to convince the North Vietnamese that we would stay in and continue fighting unless they agreed to a settlement, but to convince the South Vietnamese that we would stop fighting and get out unless they agreed to one.”⁴⁵⁰

The DRV had been prepared for an American backdown, especially after Nixon had stated on 2 November that central points still needed clarification.⁴⁵¹ However, having always been less than happy with the agreement they rejected Kissinger’s revisions.⁴⁵² Le Duc Tho had been furious when presented with Thieu’s 64 proposed changes to the text. “You told us this [was a done deal] and you swallowed your words. What kind of person must we think you to be?” he asked Kissinger. In his memoirs Kissinger admitted that the list of amendments was preposterous and he only put them forward,

“to avoid the charge that we were less than meticulous in guarding Saigon’s concerns – and to ease the task of obtaining Thieu’s approval ... Since there was no possibility whatever of obtaining this many changes – as we had warned Thieu – every one we abandoned he could use to demonstrate our lack of vigilance and as another pretext for recalcitrance.”⁴⁵³

In response Le Duc Tho became similarly obstructive, reviving the demand for Thieu’s resignation and calling for accelerated US withdrawal.⁴⁵⁴ Tho insisted the final agreement include

⁴⁴⁹ Nixon, p.721.

⁴⁵⁰ Nixon, *Memoirs*, p.724.

⁴⁵¹ R. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: the NLF’s Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1999, p.110.

⁴⁵² Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy*. Herring, p.278.

⁴⁵³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.1417.

⁴⁵⁴ Haig, p.305.

three areas under different control, rejecting the demand for withdrawal of DRV troops, and demanding release of civilian personnel in the same period as American withdrawal, quoting a US House of Representatives report affirming that the United States had spent money building jails for Thieu.⁴⁵⁵

Nixon wrote to Thieu on 23 November rebuking him again for attacks on the agreement and warning that any further delays from South Vietnam would be interpreted as attempts to scuttle an agreement, and have a disastrous effect on American support.⁴⁵⁶ He also wrote to the DRV representatives through Kissinger warning that he still had harsh military action as an alternative strategy.⁴⁵⁷

Kissinger warned the South Vietnamese that the Nixon Administration had spent the past four years working to prevent the US Congress from passing resolutions requiring withdrawal in exchange for PoWs. He read a letter from Nixon reinforcing his point that Congress would cut off funds if Saigon was perceived to be obstructing an agreement. Thieu remained obdurate, sending Nguyen Phu Duc to Washington with a 24-page letter with additional instructions to make an urgent appeal for changes and delay in the agreement.⁴⁵⁸ Nixon again informed the South Vietnamese that his administration was becoming constrained by Congress, although Duc professed to be unconvinced by the American presentation.⁴⁵⁹

The DRV delegates only became more intransigent, with the NLF pressing for a link of release of American PoWs with political detainees, destroying any chance of accepting even a revised agreement. Le Duc Tho told Kissinger, “We have undergone tens of millions of tons of

⁴⁵⁵ Berman, p.191. Brigham, p.110.

⁴⁵⁶ Berman, pp.192, 193.

⁴⁵⁷ Berman, p.193. Nixon, p.722.

⁴⁵⁸ Berman, pp.195, 197. Prados, p.509.

⁴⁵⁹ Nguyen Phu Duc, Vietnam Peace Negotiations, p.360.

bombs and shells, equalling 500-600 atomic bombs, but we are not afraid.”⁴⁶⁰

On 12 December Thieu denounced the peace plan as a ‘false peace’, and the communist delegations walked out of the talks the next day, declaring they would not return while Thieu remained as president of South Vietnam.⁴⁶¹ Kissinger cabled Bunker to hint to Thieu that President Nixon was considering forceful military action in response to DRV stalling at the peace talks, but that Nixon was becoming increasingly impatient with Thieu’s stand. “If his totally negative attitude continues, it cannot but threaten the fundamental character of our future relationship.”⁴⁶² Kissinger left Paris publicly declaring that the DRV had raised “one frivolous issue after another.”⁴⁶³

Haig was sent to Saigon again to inform Thieu that Nixon intended to settle if Hanoi accepted his latest proposal, and warn that increased military pressure on the DRV did not indicate willingness to continue the war.⁴⁶⁴ Nixon had declared his readiness to support South Vietnam if the DRV violated an agreement but he also warned Thieu that if he rejected the best treaty available the United States would, “seek a settlement with the enemy which serves US interests alone.”⁴⁶⁵ Haig told Thieu loudly and distinctly as he had been instructed to do; “Under no circumstances will President Nixon accept a veto from Saigon in regard to a peace agreement.” Thieu then argued that the Communists would resume guerrilla warfare after a ceasefire but without provoking US retaliation.⁴⁶⁶

When the peace talks collapsed Nixon launched Operation Linebacker II.⁴⁶⁷ Nixon told the

⁴⁶⁰ Berman, pp.208, 212.

⁴⁶¹ Addington, p.146.

⁴⁶² Berman, p.214.

⁴⁶³ The New York Times, 17 Dec, 1972.

⁴⁶⁴ Clodfelter, p.183.

⁴⁶⁵ Nixon to Thieu, 17 Dec 1972, Richard Cheney Files, Gerald R. Ford Library, Ann Arbor, Mich, Box 13, quoted in Herring, p.279.

⁴⁶⁶ Haig, p.310.

⁴⁶⁷ Hess, p.201.

Joint Chiefs, “This is your chance to use military power effectively to win the war, and if you don’t, I’ll consider you responsible.”⁴⁶⁸ The ‘Christmas Bombing’ began on 18 December. One hundred and twentyone B-52s hammered Hanoi and Haiphong on the first day, the first time the giant aircraft had been deployed against the heart of the DRV.⁴⁶⁹ Over the next 12 days, the United States unleashed the most intensive and devastating attacks of the war, dropping more than 36,000 tons of bombs; exceeding tonnage dropped during 1969 to 1971.⁴⁷⁰ As much as to punish the DRV and expedite an end to the war the bombing was designed to force Thieu to accept Nixon’s assurances of continued military support and force him to sign the agreement.⁴⁷¹

Twenty-nine American aircraft were brought down with 33 American airmen killed or missing in action, and another 33 became prisoners of war. Nine months of continuous bombing had devastated the NLF.⁴⁷² Pope Paul VI called for the “inhumane” bombing to cease,⁴⁷³ and Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Finland and Japan were openly critical.⁴⁷⁴ However, much of the northern population had been evacuated in anticipation of the attacks.⁴⁷⁵ Civilian casualties were fewer than 1500 in Hanoi and only 305 in Haiphong.⁴⁷⁶

The bombing did not produce a settlement markedly different from that the United States had earlier rejected. Le Duc Tho accepted the 23 November draft with 12 concessions withdrawn in December. The DRV’s desperation can be gauged by their eagerness to resume talks although they must have known Congress would cutoff financial support for the Administration’s war

⁴⁶⁸ Sulzberger, Seven Continents, N.Y., 1977, p.593. Nixon, pp.725, 726. Berman, p.215.

⁴⁶⁹ Addington, p.146.

⁴⁷⁰ Herring, p.280.

⁴⁷¹ Nixon, p.734. Hersh, p.624. Clodfelter, p.177.

⁴⁷² Clodfelter, p.194.

⁴⁷³ Washington Post, 21 Dec, 1972.

⁴⁷⁴ Washington Post 24 & 30 Dec, 1972.

⁴⁷⁵ Addington, p.147.

⁴⁷⁶ Karnow, p.653.

effort in January.⁴⁷⁷

A key difference was undertakings of support of sovereignty and continued economic and military aid Nixon had given Thieu, so that Thieu withdrew his objections to the political provisions the next day, while continuing his objections to DRV troops remaining in the south. When Thieu went to the press to complain that the Americans had attempted to force him to an agreement and he had resisted, Nixon decided that he would now be justified in abandoning Thieu, although he was again reluctant to “allow our annoyance with him to lead us to do anything that might bring about communist domination of South Vietnam.”⁴⁷⁸

At the end of 1972 there were only c.24, 200 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam. On 5 January 1973 Nixon wrote to Thieu assuring him of continued assistance in the post-settlement period.⁴⁷⁹ Defense Secretary Melvin Laird told journalists that the RVNAF was “fully capable” of defending South Vietnam, warranting “the complete termination of American involvement.”⁴⁸⁰ Kissinger and Tho resumed negotiations in Paris.

The bombing had given Nixon’s promise of continued American support credibility but had antagonized Congress.⁴⁸¹ Democrats in Congress voted to cut off all funding for the war as soon as the troop withdrawal was complete and American prisoners of war repatriated. Hours before Nixon’s inauguration, Nixon telephoned Kissinger to urge him to press Thieu to support the peace talks, and again tell him that Congress would cut off aid to his government otherwise. He told Kissinger, “I don’t know whether that threat goes far enough or not but I’d do any damn thing that is ... or cut off his head if necessary.”⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁷ Clodfelter, p.198.

⁴⁷⁸ Hersh, p.266. Nixon, p.737.

⁴⁷⁹ Nixon, p.750.

⁴⁸⁰ E. Pace, “Laird Says Saigon is Ready on Arms”, The New York Times, 9 Jan 1973.

⁴⁸¹ Clodfelter, p.200.

⁴⁸² “Nixon ready to ‘cut of head’ of South Vietnam leader”, The Australian, 5 Oct, 2009.

On 16 January he threatened Thieu with an aid cutoff if Saigon refused to cooperate with Washington on a peace agreement. “As I have told you, we will initial the agreement on January 23. I must know now whether you are prepared to join us on this course, and I must have your answer by 1200 Washington time, January 21, 1973.”⁴⁸³ On 17 January Thieu handed emissary Haig a letter to Nixon asking for one more effort for some changes, and demanding a reply by Inauguration Day, 20 January. He then made contact at the deadline, still demanding changes. Nixon replied that he would need Thieu’s agreement by noon, or he would inform Congressional leaders that Thieu had refused to go along.⁴⁸⁴ Confronted with certainty of termination of congressional funding if he refused, Thieu grudgingly acquiesced, remarking, “I have done all I can do for my country.”⁴⁸⁵

On 23 January Kissinger and Tho reached an initial agreement, and a separate ceasefire was concluded for Laos. Four days later the agreement was signed by representatives of the DRV, SRV, PRG and United States, and a ceasefire went into effect. The United States had pledged to cease all warlike acts against the DRV, not to again intervene in the internal affairs of South Vietnam, accepted temporary partition of the south into zones controlled by the South Vietnamese and the PRG, and undertaken to recognize the legality of the DRV stationing 145,000 troops in PRG zones. The Communists pledged not to attempt to unify Vietnam by force while the Saigon regime observed the terms of the accords. American and other forces were to be withdrawn within 60 days and remaining forces were not to increase troop strength or receive additional materiel except for replacement of existing armaments. A Council of National

⁴⁸³ B. Gwertzman, “Thieu Aide Discloses Promises of Force by Nixon to Back Pact”, The New York Times, 1 May, 1975.

⁴⁸⁴ Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War, pp.427, 428.

⁴⁸⁵ Clodfelter, p.201. S. Fox, “Thieu Reported to be Objecting on 4 Key Issues”, The New York Times, 18 Jan 1973. Herring, p.282.

Reconciliation and Concord (CNRC) was to be established within 90 days to reach agreement on free and democratic elections to determine the future of South Vietnam. The United States pledged to contribute unstated sums to defray costs of repairing war damage.⁴⁸⁶

Thieu had little alternative but to sign, but privately he insisted that the agreement was a sellout to the Soviets.⁴⁸⁷ He described the agreement as a ceasefire in place that could develop into a lasting peace. He told *Le Monde*, “If the Communists dare put a foot in our zones, we will kill them.”⁴⁸⁸

The tonnage of bombs dropped on Indochina during the Nixon era had exceeded that of the Johnson years, inflicting lasting human and environmental damage.⁴⁸⁹ In March the last US troops departed for the United States.

Neighbouring political domains to 1975

DRV support for the Cambodian communists diminished after 1973. After they refused to adhere to the Paris agreements they were targeted by a massive American bombing campaign that slowed communist attacks on Phnom Penh. However, by the end of 1973, they had surrounded Phnom Penh, still claiming Sihanouk as figurehead political leader.

In Indonesia, Suharto had stabilised the economy by rescheduling debt and attracting increased foreign assistance. Participation of the military in the government and economy under the New Order provided a stable political domain. Manufacturing expanded and petroleum production increased as large transnational corporations were encouraged to invest and military entrepreneurs took lead roles in the economy. A web of patron-client ties permeated all major

⁴⁸⁶ Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, in Addington, pp. 149,150. The assistance was later refused by Congress.

⁴⁸⁷ Ambassador Nguyen Xuan Phong, Statement to the Fifth Triennial Vietnam Symposium of the Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University, 18 March 2005, quoted in Prados, p.514.

⁴⁸⁸ Berman, p.243.

⁴⁸⁹ Herring, p.282.

state institutions, enabling distribution of rewards throughout the political elite to maintain political cohesion.⁴⁹⁰ Local commanders were left to raise funds for their needs as they wished, and military units ran rice-milling, building construction, cinemas and banks, often operated by Chinese businessmen with military partners to ensure necessary licences and provide “protection” for illegal activities.⁴⁹¹

Rapid inflow of capital after the new foreign investment law of 1967 turned into a flood during the 1970s.⁴⁹² However, while most of the population continued to live in poverty new wealth became concentrated in few hands. Foreign exchange from development assistance was corruptly diverted. Smuggling provided income for customs officers and high-level army officers.⁴⁹³ Huge corporations dominated by senior military figures and their associates such as Bulog and Pertamina came to dominate the economy. The government’s ability to raise revenue by conventional taxation improved during the 1970s and the military’s reliance on unconventional fund raising decreased, with the army’s official budget trebling between 1969 and 1973, as oil price rises increased government revenues. Student agitation provoked the government into conducting investigations, but the government persisted in defining corruption as only petty dishonesty of minor bureaucrats.⁴⁹⁴ The army security apparatus prevented resuscitation of communist or any other opposition, and Indonesian political parties were reorganised into a Muslim Party, the United Development Party (PPP), and non-Muslim parties into the Indonesia Democratic Party (PDI), and a government sponsored organisation, the Joint Secretariat of Functional Groups (Golkar). Thousands of labelled criminals were assassinated in

⁴⁹⁰ E. Aspinall, “Opposition and Elite Conflict in the Fall of Soeharto”, in G. Forester & R. May (Eds), The Fall of Soeharto, Singapore, 1999, p.132.

⁴⁹¹ Crouch, p.284.

⁴⁹² Crouch, p.287.

⁴⁹³ Crouch, pp.288, 292.

⁴⁹⁴ Crouch, pp.292, 299.

the main cities.⁴⁹⁵

In the Philippines, protesting increasing disorder from student demonstrations, and threats of communist insurgency sponsored by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the Muslim separatist movement the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law on 23 September 1972.⁴⁹⁶ The announcement was preceded by arrests of thousands of political opponents and disarming of private military forces, closure of schools, religious establishments and television stations.⁴⁹⁷ Martial law allowed important new concessions to be given to foreign investors, including a prohibition on strikes by organized labour. In January 1973 Marcos proclaimed the ratification of a new constitution based on a parliamentary system, with himself as both president and prime minister, but he then did not convene the interim legislature provided by the constitution. He packed the Supreme Court with close associates and signed a decree making all subsequent executive decrees and orders “laws of the land.”⁴⁹⁸ State corporations were created to establish dominant presences in oil production, power generation mass transportation, fertilizer production and investment. American acquiescence was ensured by continued acceptance of two huge American military bases north of Manila, Subic Bay Naval base and Clark Air Base.⁴⁹⁹ However, disillusionment with the consolidation of political and economic control by Marcos, his family and close associates increased, as workers’ real income dropped, and few farmers benefited from land reform. The government began to borrow large sums from the international banking community, and reports

⁴⁹⁵ J. Barker, “State of Fear: Controlling the Criminal Contagion in Suharto’s New Order”, in B. Anderson (Ed.), *Violence and the State in Suharto’s Indonesia*, Ithaca, N.Y., 2001, p.20.

⁴⁹⁶ While the CPP was not a significant political or military threat a separatist rebellion broke out in 1973 led by the MNLF.

⁴⁹⁷ Abinales & Amoroso, p.205.

⁴⁹⁸ F. Baciungan (Ed), *The Powers of the Philippine President*, Quezon City, 1983, 14, pp.97-98. Abinales & Amoroso, p.207.

⁴⁹⁹ Abinales & Amoroso, p.209.

of widespread corruption began to surface. Although the economy grew dramatically until the mid-1970s, growth was largely based on export crops for which global demand diminished after the 1973 oil price rises. Marcos and his family and friends continued to prosper while the rest of the country remained impoverished.⁵⁰⁰

After halfhearted economic reforms, direct military rule had been reimposed in Thailand in 1971. From June 1973, student demonstrations began to focus on restoring the constitution and democracy. The generals refused to negotiate and arrested student leaders, claiming that the students were manipulated by communists. In October 1973, half a million people demonstrated in Bangkok, extracting a promise of a constitution within a year from the generals. However, as the crowd was dispersing the next day soldiers fired into them, killing 77 and wounding 857.⁵⁰¹ A new constitution in 1974 brought parliamentary democracy with an appointed Senate, until the triumph of communist governments in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1975 was interpreted by the military and business community as necessitating a stronger government.

In Burma the military leaders became civilian leaders under a new constitution in 1974. The non-communist ethnic separatist groups joined to form a National Democratic Front. A deteriorating economy brought food riots in the mid-1970s.

Thieu's War

Only months after the Paris Agreement, Hanoi, Saigon and Washington were trading charges of ceasefire violations. Buoyed by Nixon's promises Thieu defied the peace agreement from the outset. Controlling approximately 75% of the land and 85% of the people, he resettled refugees and built forts in contested areas, attacked DRV bases and supply lines and shelled and bombed villages under PRG control, losing 6,000 men during the first three months of "peace", among

⁵⁰⁰ Abinales & Amoroso, pp.213, 214.

⁵⁰¹ Baker & Phongpaichit, p.188.

the highest casualties of any period of the war.⁵⁰² He also disregarded provisions of peace agreements on freedom of the press, speech and political association.⁵⁰³

The PRG also attempted to consolidate territory under its control and foment political agitation. The DRV infiltrated troops, built highways linking staging areas to strategic zones in the south and constructed a 1,600 kilometre (1,000 mile) petroleum pipeline for resupply.⁵⁰⁴ A hundred thousand soldiers from both sides were killed in the two years after the ceasefire.⁵⁰⁵

The 4-power International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS) created by the Paris agreements could not constrain the fresh fighting.⁵⁰⁶ In March Kissinger informed Nixon of significant violations of the agreement and recommended a "prompt and violent" response, but action scheduled for after release of the third increment of American POWs was delayed when that release was delayed.⁵⁰⁷

Thieu had reconciled himself to the end of American support but he continued extracting what he could. After attempting a meeting with Nixon in the final phase of negotiations and being postponed until after the agreement, Thieu, characterised by Nixon in 1969 as "one of the four or five greatest politicians in the world", visited the United States to lobby for further assistance.⁵⁰⁸ Nixon had secretly promised to continue, "full economic and military aid" and "to respond with full force" should the DRV violate the agreement.⁵⁰⁹ At San Clemente, Nixon again assured Thieu, "You can count on us."⁵¹⁰ Information of Nixon's pledge to support South Vietnam by

⁵⁰² Herring, p.286. M. Parker, "Vietnam: The War That Won't End", *Foreign Affairs*, 53, (Jan 1975), pp.365, 366. G. Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam and the Paris Agreements*, Bloomington Ind, 1975, pp. 174-184, 188-196.

⁵⁰³ Szulc, p.677.

⁵⁰⁴ Herring, p.287.

⁵⁰⁵ Parker, p.352.

⁵⁰⁶ Prados, p.519. The Commission "ceased to function in any meaningful way within a few months of its establishment." A. Dawson, *55 Days: The Fall of South Vietnam*, Engelwood Cliffs, N.J., 1977, p.2.

⁵⁰⁷ Berman, pp.255, 256.

⁵⁰⁸ "The New Thieu", *Time*, 9 April 1973.

⁵⁰⁹ Nixon, pp.749, 750.

⁵¹⁰ Hosmer, Kellen, Jenkins, p38.

force was leaked to the press, probably by the South Vietnamese.⁵¹¹

Throughout the rest of 1973 the Nixon Administration employed subterfuges to maintain a high level of military aid without overtly violating the Paris accords.⁵¹² However, Nixon proved reluctant to pursue the \$1 billion Thieu sought from Congress, asking for only \$700 million and urging Thieu to better cooperate with the peace process.⁵¹³

On 10 May the Senate passed a measure terminating all funding for military intervention in or over Indochina, which Nixon subsequently vetoed. Nixon was eventually forced to accept a compromise extending the deadline to 15 August.⁵¹⁴ War broke out between Israel and Syria and Egypt, and a subsequent oil embargo precipitated an economic crisis in the United States. In November Congress passed over another veto of the War Powers Act, requiring a president to inform Congress within 48 hours of deployment of military forces abroad and obliging withdrawal within 60 days without congressional endorsement.⁵¹⁵

In June, Kissinger and Tho had met in Paris to agree on measures to improve ceasefire observance. Thieu had inherited a sizeable bureaucratic apparatus.⁵¹⁶ In July he launched an ‘administrative revolution’ to consolidate his government by fostering domestic political support. He put Nguyen Tien Hung in charge of economic reform, but corruption continued. He signed an amnesty that freed 967 political prisoners, including Truong Dinh Dzu, who had run a strong second in the 1967 presidential elections and then been jailed for advocating negotiations with

⁵¹¹ Prados, p.520. In May 1975 Nguyen Tien Hung, former Minister for Planning made public letters from President Nixon promising that the United States would, “Take swift and severe retaliatory action” and would “respond with full force” if North Vietnam violated the Paris peace talks, promises that he claimed Nixon had used to eventually persuade Thieu to accept the agreement. Nixon had also written that “it is essential that I have your support and that your government does not emerge as the obstacle to a peace which American public opinion now universally desires.” B. Gwertzman, “Thieu Aide Discloses Promises of Force by Nixon to Back Pact”, *The New York Times*, 1 May, 1975. Nixon, p.718. W. Zumwalt, *On Watch*, N.Y., 1976, pp.414-415.

⁵¹² Herring, p.287.

⁵¹³ “Diplomat Thieu”, *Time*, 16 April 1973

⁵¹⁴ Willbanks, p.195.

⁵¹⁵ Herring, p.290.

⁵¹⁶ Parker, p.353.

the Communists. Bars and nightclubs closed since the previous May were allowed to reopen and Thieu invited his opponents to form their own opposition party, although still illegal under an election law he had promulgated the previous December. However, without the money the United States and allied troops had been pumping into the economy unemployment soon became endemic.⁵¹⁷

Contemporaneously, the rice harvest was down by a quarter and prices of staples doubled. Oil prices had been rising before the October war in the Middle East and the Arab oil embargo included prohibition of exports for American military activity, interpreted by the Singapore refinery as applying to South Vietnam because the United States paid their account.⁵¹⁸ More than 90% of soldiers were not receiving enough to sustain their families. Commanders robbed payrolls and embezzled other funds. Quartermasters insisted on bribes to deliver supplies, and villagers were more squeezed and alienated.⁵¹⁹ Casualties were equal to those inflicted during the Easter offensive and higher than many previous periods of the war, at over 100 ARVN soldiers killed or wounded every day.⁵²⁰

Despite the penurious economic climate Thieu proceeded with force increases, compensating by deactivating 100,000 Popular Front troops. US financial assistance continued to be greater than that received by the DRV from their allies.⁵²¹ The DRV were rebuffed by both Moscow and Beijing when they asked for additional military assistance in October 1973.⁵²² In August pro-Thieu candidates won all contested seats in the Senate elections.

⁵¹⁷ One hundred and sixty thousand jobs provided by the American establishment in June 1969 had decreased to 17,300 by September 1973 and the \$400 million spent by American soldiers and organizations had evaporated. A 45% reduction of per capita income was accompanied by mass unemployment and 90% inflation. Parker, pp. 362, 363.

⁵¹⁸ Prados, p.524.

⁵¹⁹ Karnow, p.661.

⁵²⁰ F. Butterfield, "In the Mekong Delta: A War with Two Faces", The New York Times, 8 Sept 1973.

⁵²¹ Prados, p.525.

⁵²² Karnow, p.660. Parker, p.369.

In October the Twentyfirst Plenum of the Central Committee of the DRV concluded that Thieu could not be made to implement the Paris Agreement, and resolved to achieve reunification by military means. The Nixon administration became increasingly compromised by Watergate, and increasingly politically ineffective. In January 1974 Thieu declared that the war had begun again. He predicted victory now that South Vietnam was free to fight without meddling of American advisors, and several of his commanders urged him to invade the DRV.⁵²³ He stepped up ground and air attacks on enemy bases and launched a series of territorial conquests of PRG territories.⁵²⁴ Saigon's control of people and land had increased by May.⁵²⁵ However, as the ARVN encroached on areas long Communist-controlled the Communists retaliated and the heaviest fighting since the ceasefire broke out. The Military Commission of the Political Bureau in Hanoi announced the plan for a final offensive against South Vietnam.⁵²⁶

A South Vietnam National Assembly special session voted to amend the constitution so that Thieu could run for a third term. He apparently fell out with Prime Minister Khiem over this decision as Khiem had ambitions to run himself.⁵²⁷ In April, the U.S. House of Representatives rejected the Nixon Administration's request for \$474 million increase in aid to South Vietnam. The RVN withdrew from Paris talks on political reconciliation with the PRG, and the PRG delegation then withdrew protesting the RVN withdrawal and ARVN military operations.

Assistant for National Security Affairs General Quang had been reluctant to pass on bad news, and he and others had learned to concur with Thieu's opinion of the Americans, so that the regime continued to expect eventual American support. However, in August the U.S. House of

⁵²³ Brigham, *ARVN*, p.122.

⁵²⁴ Herring, p.291.

⁵²⁵ Parker, p.366.

⁵²⁶ "We have sufficient strength to overwhelm the enemy troops. The U.S. has proved to be completely impotent, and even if it increases its aid, it cannot save the puppets from collapse." *The Anti-U.S. Resistance War for National Salvation of the Fatherland*, Hanoi, 1988, p.179, quoted in Brigham, *ARVN*, p.123

⁵²⁷ Hosmer, Keller & Jenkins, pp.56, 66.

Representatives cut the military aid appropriation for South Vietnam from \$1 billion to \$700 million. Then, as the Watergate scandal broke Nixon resigned the presidency in favour of Gerald Ford. President Ford wrote to Thieu to reaffirm the United States commitment to South Vietnam and promising “adequate” support for Saigon.⁵²⁸

Despite this promise, South Vietnam soon discovered it was on its own. Al Haig begged Ford to keep promises he had made to South Vietnam but was told, “Al, I’m sorry. I just can’t put the country through this again.”⁵²⁹

A Catholic anti-corruption movement led by Father Tran Huu Thanh began to challenge the government.⁵³⁰ In September antigovernment demonstrations erupted in Saigon after confiscation of newspapers that published Father Thanh’s six count ‘indictment’ of corruption in the Thieu regime and family.⁵³¹ Father Thanh called for Thieu’s resignation for having abused that anti-Communist cause to appropriate power for himself and to serve the interests of his own family and group.”⁵³² Thieu ordered a new anti-corruption drive and dismissed two divisional commanders, four members of his cabinet, three of the four Corps commanders, and nearly 400 field grade officers.⁵³³ *The Washington Post* alleged that military equipment worth more than \$200 million had been lost or squandered by the Thieu government and a large portion sold by Saigon officials to the enemy. The General Accounting Office claimed 143 vessels, including patrol boats and landing craft had disappeared.⁵³⁴

Military collapse

The Hoa Hao movement had abandoned their support for the regime and given refuge to

⁵²⁸ Hosmer, Keller & Jenkins, p.39.

⁵²⁹ Haig, p.318.

⁵³⁰ Valentine, p.145.

⁵³¹ Hosmer, Keller & Jenkins, p.54. Including involvement in the heroin traffic. Ky, *Twenty Years*, p.112.

⁵³² Ky, *Twenty Years*, pp.112, 113.

⁵³³ Parker, p.364.

⁵³⁴ Ky, *Twenty Years*, p.113.

hundreds of thousands of deserters, organizing them into a force Thieu decided to confront. The An Quang Buddhists had also increased their resistance to the regime, creating a variety of movements with clandestine communist empathy and fomenting street disorder. The Montagnards had become alienated by careless brutality and ethnic discrimination.⁵³⁵

By late 1974 the military balance had shifted in favour of the DRV and the NLF. South Vietnam had become overextended. Only c.150,000 of its million-man army were actual combat troops. Approximately 20,000 of them were 'flower soldiers' who had purchased freedom from fighting. The DRV had c.285,000 troops in the south and had stockpiled supplies, and was able to move logistics including tanks to any battlefield within hours.⁵³⁶ The PRG had regained control of most the territories in the Mekong delta that had been lost during the previous year.⁵³⁷

In December the Hanoi Political Bureau adopted a plan for a military campaign to defeat the Thieu regime in two years. The leadership concluded that even if the United States responded with naval power and airpower it could not rescue the corrupt Saigon administration from disastrous collapse.⁵³⁸ The ARVN had been drained by casualties and desertions since resumption of hostilities so that numerical strength had declined 40%, while endemic corruption had diverted much of the newly supplied materiel to inappropriate uses.⁵³⁹ In early January 1975 Communist forces seized Phuoc Long province north of Saigon. Thieu failed to make any decision on whether or not to evacuate until the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff proposed a strategic withdrawal abandoning indefensible terrain. Thieu again resisted making a decision.⁵⁴⁰

His 'defend everywhere' policy meant that his forces were stretched thin everywhere.⁵⁴¹ He

⁵³⁵ Hosmer, Keller & Jenkins, pp.54, 55.

⁵³⁶ Herring, p.291.

⁵³⁷ Parker, pp.366, 367.

⁵³⁸ Van Tien Dung, J. Spragens (Trans), Our Great Spring Victory, Hanoi, 2005, p.28.

⁵³⁹ Addington, p.154.

⁵⁴⁰ Prados, p.528.

⁵⁴¹ Willbanks, p.225.

continued to profess to believe the United States would come to the rescue. President Ford wanted to honour Nixon's promises but had continuing problems in the Middle East, and while Nixon and Kissinger had not divulged to Congress or administration officials the content of letters to Thieu including promise of, "full force should the [Paris] settlement be violated by North Vietnam",⁵⁴² he agreed with need to bolster Thieu's morale with firm assurances.⁵⁴³ As the situation deteriorated Ford requested \$722 million of emergency military assistance for Saigon but Congress overwhelmingly refused, pointing out that South Vietnam had recently abandoned more equipment than could be purchased with the additional funds, and that no amount of money could save an army that refused to fight. Kissinger explained to journalists that the money was necessary to ensure Thieu's cooperation in the evacuation of Americans.⁵⁴⁴ Congress eventually approved \$300 million for evacuation of Americans and "humanitarian" purposes.⁵⁴⁵

In March the PAVN opened an attack on Ban Me Thuot which fell the next day. Thieu ordered the Airborne Division from I Corps recalled, apparently to protect his own life.⁵⁴⁶ He claimed that the loss of four northern provinces meant that he had to redeploy forces to save Saigon.⁵⁴⁷ After consulting with his senior officers, Thieu agreed to strategic redeployment to defend the Third and Fourth Corps, abandoning Pleiku and Kontum. The ARVN retreat from the central highlands soon turned into a rout. Abandoning the highlands cost six provinces, and at least two divisions and remaining confidence of the army and the people.⁵⁴⁸ Then Thieu ordered

⁵⁴² Nixon to Thieu, 5 January 1973, quoted in Hung & Seechter, p.392.

⁵⁴³ D. Anderson, Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War 1945-1975, Lawrence, Ka, 1993, pp.187-8.

⁵⁴⁴ Haig, p.318.

⁵⁴⁵ Herring, p.296.

⁵⁴⁶ Hosmer, Kellen, Jenkins, pp.69,70.

⁵⁴⁷ Cao Van Vien, Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse, Washington, D.C., 1977, pp..98, 99, quoted in Willbans, p.246.

⁵⁴⁸ Herring, p.294.

Hue held at all costs,⁵⁴⁹ but by the end of March the PAVN had taken Hue and Danang.

Thieu had become reclusive, switching among private addresses within and without the city. He was rumoured to spend every night in a different room to avoid assassination.⁵⁵⁰ He was also rumoured to have made a deal with the Communists to cede the northern provinces.⁵⁵¹ South Vietnam had been cut in two, and Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay were abandoned before they were threatened.⁵⁵² Thieu claimed that his forces were retreating to regroup to defend Saigon and the Mekong delta.⁵⁵³ He cancelled a scheduled address to the nation then made the address a day later, urging the people to maintain their “unfaltering anti-Communist determination”, while avoiding mention of his decision to abandon large parts of the country.

Many South Vietnamese assumed that Thieu was still the Americans’ preferred leader.⁵⁵⁴ However, rumours had been sweeping Saigon that he was preparing to flee. In April, Thomas Polger, CIA station chief in Saigon, cabled Langley recommending that Thieu be ousted for Minh. Virtually contemporaneously, Air Marshal Ky approached Chief of General Staff General Cao Van Vien proposing a coup against Thieu. Vien consulted recently retired Prime Minister Khiem who told Thieu of Ky’s plan. Ambassador Graham Martin made it clear to Ky that the United States disapproved any plan to unseat Thieu.⁵⁵⁵ However, Polgar convinced Ambassador Martin that Thieu should be ousted to save the country, and Martin cabled the recommendation to Kissinger.⁵⁵⁶

On 19 April Martin went to see Thieu to tell him he should resign and that the United States

⁵⁴⁹ Sheehan, p.765.

⁵⁵⁰ Hosmer, Kellen, Jenkins, p.69.

⁵⁵¹ Willbanks, p.247.

⁵⁵² Herring, p.295.

⁵⁵³ Addington, pp.156, 157.

⁵⁵⁴ “Thieu: Between Himself and His God”, *Time*, 31 Mar 1975.

⁵⁵⁵ Ky, *Twenty Years*, pp. 7, 203, 211.

⁵⁵⁶ Berman, p.267.

would guarantee his safety.⁵⁵⁷ The CIA began to encourage Vien and Khiem to proceed with a coup for 23 April. Then on 21 April Thieu announced his resignation in a televised address to the nation, complaining that Kissinger had tricked him into signing the Paris agreements and then the United States had not sent promised assistance.⁵⁵⁸

He was replaced by Vice President Tran Van Huong. He fled with 17 tonnes of luggage,⁵⁵⁹ to Taiwan on 25 April, and then to exile in Surrey in the UK.

President Tran Van Huong transferred power to General Duong Van Minh and it was “Big” Minh who issued a radio appeal for ARVN troops to lay down their arms as the PAVN advanced on Saigon. Vietnam was reunited and proclaimed a republic.

Rationalisation of neighbouring political domains

In December, after seizures of power by ‘Peoples’ Committees’ and elections in November, establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic was declared.

The Lon Nol government had collapsed after two years of civil war. In January 1975, the Maoist Khmer Rouge launched a final offensive from a siege ring around the capital Phnom Penh. While South Vietnam was beginning to disintegrate Lon Nol fled from Phnom Penh for exile in Hawaii. The Khmer Rouge entered the Cambodian capital after his remaining forces collapsed. Communist forces ordered inhabitants of the capital and other towns to relocate to the country. Money, markets and private property were abolished. Schools, hospitals, shops, offices and monasteries were closed. Saloth Sar became prime minister as Pol Pot. At least 1.5 million Cambodians or 20% of the population died from overwork, starvation, disease or execution before the Vietnamese invaded in 1977. In response to the 1978 Vietnam overthrow of the

⁵⁵⁷ Berman, p.268. A message approved by President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger, Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War, p.543.

⁵⁵⁸ Ky, Twenty Years, p.222.

⁵⁵⁹ Ky, Twenty Years, p.114.

Khmer Rouge regime, China invaded northern Vietnam the next year and they fought a brief and bitter war.

The United States had been winding down military operations in Southeast Asia from 1968 but had bolstered the Thai military with larger assistance packages as American forces withdrew after the end of the Vietnam War. After a demonstration at Thammasat University was brutally repressed, an army faction staged a coup in October 1976, to be overthrown by a less virulently anti-communist coup a year later. While an armed insurgency peaked at 10,000 strong in 1979, between 1977 and 1980 there were three more military coups in Thailand.⁵⁶⁰

In Indonesia, Suharto had been re-elected for four successive presidential terms. During this period he had acquired considerable wealth, and his children had become significant entrepreneurs as their business interests and political ambitions were given free reign, and national development policy was subordinated to their economic predations.⁵⁶¹ Opposition to the regime had consequently increased and after the 1973 collapse of the militarily-dominated government in Thailand, student opposition again became vociferous.⁵⁶² There were riots at failure to improve the lives of the poor in Bandung in 1973 and Jakarta in 1974. Socio-economic polarisation was wide and increasing.⁵⁶³

Despite vigorous efforts to maintain political unity of the vast and diverse political environment the Indonesian political order was also occasionally interrupted by outbursts of anti-Chinese violence and Islamic fundamentalism as well as by centripetal political tendencies and intra-ethnic disputes. Indonesia had taken control of Dutch New Guinea and perpetrated a fraudulent UN plebiscite in 1961 to assume political control. In 1975 Indonesia invaded the

⁵⁶⁰ Baker & Phongpaichit, p.196.

⁵⁶¹ Aspinall, in Forester & May, p.133.

⁵⁶² Crouch, p.311.

⁵⁶³ Ikrar Nusa Bhakti, "Trends in Indonesian Student Movements in 1998", in Forester & May, p.174.

newly independent former Portuguese colony on Timor, and during the next decades a quarter of the population died as result of military occupation and determined resistance. Rising oil exports and prices contributed to economic prosperity at least for an elite during the late 1970s and 1980s. While Suharto had established political stability and economic recovery his political dominance began to inhibit political stability and economic recovery during the 1980s and 1990s as many sought greater economic and political participation.⁵⁶⁴ A political thaw was proclaimed in the late 1980s, but by the mid-1990s Suharto had re-established control over the armed forces.

In 1997, Thailand experienced a monetary crisis that quickly spread to other East and Southeast Asian countries, effectively crippling the Indonesian economy. Suharto signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund. Despite the crisis and his increasing age and ill health Suharto was re-elected as president in 1998. However, prices had been skyrocketing since mid-1997 and violent student demonstrations shook Jakarta while he was out of the country. On 21 May he was forced to resign. His Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie became president and attempted overdue political reforms, withdrawing Indonesia from Timor L'este (EastTimor.) However, the polity continued to be dominated by corruption. Suharto's accumulated fortune remained under his control until his death and was then deployed to continue and protect his family's political dominance. There was no serious prospect of overturning the incumbent social and political elite without a purge of the most corrupt elements of the New Order elite.⁵⁶⁵ Suharto was later estimated to have stolen hundreds of billions of US dollars desperately need for development across the archipelago.

In the Philippines the MNLF war cost the lives of more than 13,000 people from 1973 to 1975 causing a million to flee their homes. While the PKP surrendered in 1974, the CPP strengthened

⁵⁶⁴ Ikrar Nusa Bhakti, p.174.

⁵⁶⁵ Aspinall, in Forester & May, p.141.

as Marcos' dominance declined and by the late 1980s had a guerrilla force of c.15,000.⁵⁶⁶ In 1977, opposition leader former Senator Benigno Aquino Jr., was jailed under sentence of death for alleged subversion. Martial law was relaxed in 1978, the ban on political parties lifted and elections for an interim National Assembly were held and won by Marcos, but predominantly believed to have been comprehensively won by the opposition under Aquino.

Aquino was allowed to go into exile in the United States in 1980, and the following year, after announcing the complete suspension of martial law, Marcos won a virtually uncontested election for a new six-year term. However, the military conflicts had exhausted the state of resources while increasing use of torture and extra-judicial killing had alienated and enhanced recruitment for opposition groups. Real wages of skilled and unskilled workers in Manila had fallen to less than half their 1962 value by 1980, and unemployment increased from c.14.7% in 1978 to more than 24% in 1982.⁵⁶⁷ Corrupt exploitation meant that economic development had become impossible and diminishing returns increasingly constrained the political influence of even the privileged elite.

In August 1983, as Aquino returned to Manila to provide a political focus for opposition to Marcos, he was assassinated at the airport, shocking many who had avoided dangerous political commitment into becoming active against the regime. In late 1985, after intense political pressures from within and without the Philippines, Marcos called a snap presidential election for February the next year. Aquino's widow Corazon became the candidate of a coalition of opposition Parties. The CPP decided to boycott the poll.

Marcos was declared the official winner, but strong public outcry over the election results

⁵⁶⁶ Abinales & Amoroso, pp.217, 219.

⁵⁶⁷ J. Boyce, Political Economy of Growth and Impoverishment in the Marcos Era, Quezon City, 1993, pp. 27, 31. Abinales & Amoroso, p.215.

precipitated a revolt by reform elements of the military that by the end of the month had driven Marcos from power, and Aquino assumed the presidency. Marcos was taken by helicopter to Clark Air Base on 25 February, 1986, and then to Hawaii. Legislative elections in May 1987 and the convening of a new bicameral congress in July marked the return of democratic government. Aquino appointed a Presidential Commission of Good Government to recover wealth illegally acquired by Marcos, his family and the cronies. Senator J. Salongo and fellow commissioners estimated the amount stolen over 20 years at least from \$US5-10 billion.⁵⁶⁸ Endemic corruption continued to be a problem within the Philippines.

In Burma student demonstrations in 1987 and workers' riots the next year brought resignations of U San Yu as president and Ne Win as Party president, and after massacre of 3,000 unarmed demonstrators, the newly appointed president Brig-Gen Seil Lwin. As a mass democracy movement swept the country Maung Maung promised elections within three months. However, General Saw Maung staged a coup in September 1988. Opposition leaders were arrested and the country's name changed to Myanmar. 1990 elections gave overwhelming victory to the opposition but the military retained power, adopting the Indonesian model.

Aftermath

Nguyen Van Thieu had gained authoritarian control of the South Vietnamese political domain by pretending to be a be real political alternative to authoritarian communism in Indochina, by profiting from corruption to purchase political influence and prosecuting war against, and executing and imprisoning his political opponents. He used a violent usurpation of political dominance to enlist massive military assistance from the United States and allies together with economic assistance that temporarily fuelled an unsustainable economy that further enhanced his

⁵⁶⁸ R. Watson et al, "Hard up in Hawaii", Newsweek, 31 March 1986, p.25.

false political dominance. His false political dominance prolonged the Cold War confrontation between the United States and allies and the Soviet Union and China, even as the Soviet Union and China had begun to diverge.

Thieu's strategic thinking was limited to maintaining power and enhancing that political dominance. Elected with only 35% of the vote in 1967 he had subverted Lyndon Johnson's efforts to achieve peace in 1968 to ensure continued support for his political dominance, and ensured the election of Richard Nixon who then kept him in power for the next four years. He also corruptly ensured his unopposed re-election in 1971, and in 1972 he did everything he could to prevent or delay American withdrawal, and the peace agreements that eventually collapsed support for his regime. After the war Thieu's own political and military elite dismissed him as inept, overly suspicious and slow to any action. He had appointed corrupt and incompetent men and was himself involved in the extensive inherent corruption of his political domain.⁵⁶⁹ His autocracy eventually ensured the defeat of his regime when his forces came to depend on his orders and were paralysed as he became indecisive or vague.⁵⁷⁰

Continuance of military conflict diverted resources from development assistance and demand development, particularly in Southeast Asia, but also within the West. For Americans their longest war until Afghanistan badly financially constrained their economy at a vital stage of political development, consequently increasing resource competition that promoted extremism and chauvinism within the American political domain. Anti-communism became a nuclear-defended substitute for altruistic Christianity that inevitably proved hopeless.

As Thieu's false political dominance unnecessarily prolonged hostilities of the Cold War for as much as 20 years, the corrupt Saigon political dominance fostered and excused corrupt

⁵⁶⁹ Hosmer, Kellen, Jenkins, p.62.

⁵⁷⁰ Hosmer, Kellen, Jenkins, p.66.

political dominance of neighbouring political domains supposedly also dedicated to anti-communism and sustained by corruption. While war had been raging in Indochina, many others had suffered repression or been killed in similar conflicts and oppressions across Southeast and East Asia, and more had their lives blighted and demeaned by corrupt authoritarianism pretending to advocate freedom and democracy supported by the United States as part of the Cold War. Diversion of resources to maintenance of corrupt authoritarianism throughout Southeast Asia forestalled urgently necessary development and condemned many millions to subsist in harsh poverty for more decades. Injustice of anti-communist repression by Thieu and similar regimes persuaded many to allegiance to Marxist ideology, delaying the end of ideological polarisation that divided the planet militarily, diverting from overdue political evolution.

Perhaps a hundred million people had had their lives shortened and impoverished as consequence of Thieu's political dominance. South Vietnamese battle deaths were between 220,000 and 244,000, and the DRV's c.800,000 with another 300,000 missing in action. There are over 58,000 names of dead inscribed on the United States Vietnam Memorial. South Korea lost over 4 000, and the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand a total of c.2,000 military personnel dead. In 1995, the Vietnamese government estimated c.2 million civilian deaths in each of the two regroupment zones of Vietnam. Approximately 700,000 Cambodians and 60,000 Laotians died, with at least another 1.5 million Cambodians under Pol Pot.⁵⁷¹ Many more were maimed by the war and later affected by dislocation, deforestation, unexploded mines and bombs, and by lasting effects of defoliants. As many as five million were directly affected by use of dioxin-contaminated Agent Orange, with birth abnormalities

⁵⁷¹ Prados, p.531.

persisting into at least a fourth generation, affecting as many as three million in 2010.⁵⁷² At least an estimated three million Vietnamese have suffered from health problems caused by exposure to the dioxin in Agent Orange, after the Americans sprayed Vietnam's jungles to deprive the enemy of places to hide. Over a million U.S. veterans have received compensation for the effects of Agent Orange.⁵⁷³ In 2012 after respiratory cancers and birth defects among allied servicemen and exposed Vietnamese became evident, the United States pledged \$U.S.450 million to begin an amelioration effort at Da Nang involving digging up vast quantities of soil contaminated by loading of Agent Orange and repeatedly heating it to 300C to degrade accidentally included dioxin.⁵⁷⁴

Thieu's regime made the authoritarianism of the DRV seem essential for national cohesion during the war and for many years afterwards, so that repression and political polarisation constrained the lives of many more Indochinese. Persecution of opponents of the new regime soon caused a massive refugee exodus. A million people fled as a mass refugee exodus of 1975 was followed by another in 1978 of boat-people. Many lost their lives as refugees or never had the lives they would have had because of the persistence of war after 1954. Vietnam continued as an authoritarian socialist state until the eventual bankruptcy of the Soviet Union ended aid from that polity and Vietnam began economic liberalisation, and only began to re-open in the 21st century.

The 'Domino Theory' was largely made redundant by economic development over the subsequent decades, and by collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989 that fatally undermined

⁵⁷² N.Y. Times.

⁵⁷³ K. Vaswani, "One Square Mile of Vietnam: Da Nang", *BBC News*, 23 August, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23497563>

⁵⁷⁴ J. Stapleton, "Cleaning up the horror, 37 years on", *The Australian*, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/cleaning-up-the-horror-37-years-on/story-e6frg6so-1226442484080> "U.S. starts its first Agent Orange cleanup in Vietnam", *Reuters*, 9 August, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/09/us-vietnam-usa-agentorange-idUSBRE87803K20120809>

enthusiasm for Marxism as an oppositional ideology. After financial speculation polarised political environments so that economies became so unsustainable that demands for democratic government became irresistible, corrupt authoritarian anti-communist Southeast Asian regimes dramatically failed in the 1990s, although corruption and authoritarianism continued to persist in predominantly unevangelised political domains.

Nguyen Van Thieu lived in Boston, a self-proclaimed billionaire, until his death of heart failure there in 2001, aged 78. The next year the Boston Catholic Church paedophile scandal broke.