

Nguyen Van Thieu Is Dead at 76; Last President of South Vietnam

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Nguyen Van Thieu, the former president of South Vietnam who led his nation through most of its war against North Vietnam until it was finally overrun by a Communist offensive in 1975, died late Saturday at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center here, a hospital spokesman said. He was 76.

The hospital would not release the cause of death, but the spokesman said Mr. Thieu had collapsed at his home in suburban Foxboro on Thursday and was taken to the hospital, where he was kept on a respirator.

Since the end of the war in April 1975, when **Mr. Thieu, like many Vietnamese, believed that his American allies had abandoned him**, he had lived quietly, first in London and later in Boston, avoiding politics.

As a colonel in the South Vietnamese army, Mr. Thieu first came to prominence in **helping to organize the coup that ousted President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963**. He moved up swiftly, becoming chairman of the ruling military junta's National Directory, then chief of state in 1965. He won the presidency in 1967, beating the more flamboyant air force officer, Nguyen Cao Ky. He won the presidency again in 1971 in a rigged election and remained in the post until April 21, 1975, when he resigned and fled the country as North Vietnamese troops rushed toward Saigon.

For a succession of American ambassadors to Saigon like Ellsworth Bunker and Graham Martin and American commanders in Vietnam like Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Mr. **Thieu became the Vietnamese they depended on to represent the people of South Vietnam. But Mr. Thieu, in the eyes of many Vietnamese, was an extremely cautious man who despite having a million-man army and a large secret police apparatus presided over a balance of weakness.**

As the Vietnamese saying had it, he "only jumped when the tide mounted to his toes."

Loyalty and Betrayal

In the end, **what counted for Mr. Thieu was personal loyalty**, and so generals in the South Vietnamese army and provincial chiefs in the South Vietnamese government tended to be promoted based on their allegiance to Mr. Thieu, rather than merit. **It was an old-**

fashioned, Confucian system, often greased by corruption, that had great difficulty competing against the better organized and motivated Communists, despite the support of 500,000 American troops and billions of dollars in aid.

After South Vietnam's sudden collapse in 1975, after a large conventional offensive by the North Vietnamese, Mr. Thieu went into quiet exile, deliberately staying out of Vietnamese refugee anti-Communist politics, perhaps because he felt he would be blamed for his government's failures.

But a recently published book by Larry Berman, "No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam," (The Free Press), draws on previously secret archives to show that **President Richard M. Nixon and Henry S. Kissinger, then the national security adviser, ignored Mr. Thieu's objections to their peace negotiations with Hanoi and agreed to withdraw American troops from Vietnam without any guarantees that North Vietnam would respect the Paris peace accords of 1973.**

Mr. Berman, a professor and director of the University of California Washington Center, wrote that Nixon and Mr. Kissinger knew that under the accords North Vietnam would keep its troops in the south, and that they both expected North Vietnam to violate the accords with further offensive operations. The two men were willing to accept this risk merely to get a peace agreement so they would have something to present to the American people, Professor Berman wrote, and Nixon secretly pledged to Mr. Thieu that he would resume American B-52 bomber raids against North Vietnam in retaliation for any stepped-up Communist attacks.

But Watergate intervened, eventually driving Nixon from office before the final North Vietnamese offensive began in March 1975. So the American B-52's, which had blunted a North Vietnamese offensive in 1972 before the peace agreement, even without American ground troops, never returned.

In Mr. Berman's account, Mr. Thieu emerges as far more clear-sighted than either Nixon or Mr. Kissinger about the North Vietnamese and their intentions.

Mr. Thieu, who survived as Saigon's leader despite years of Communist attacks and plots by rival South Vietnamese generals, was not a prepossessing leader. His manner was not dramatic. His speeches tended to be long, rambling, dreary and often incoherent, including his final talk on April 21, 1975, announcing his decision to resign.

Unlike President Diem, whom Mr. Thieu, then a young colonel, helped to overthrow in 1963, he was neither loved nor deeply hated. Though he did not hesitate to use his secret police to throw his enemies in jail, he somehow used his power less oppressively than Mr. Diem had, and generated less passionate emotions.

It may have helped that Mr. Thieu entered the political scene at a time when the South Vietnamese were becoming emotionally exhausted from years of war and emotional turmoil. This was intensified by the Communists' Tet offensive in 1968 and the spring offensive of 1972.

Duty and Disillusionment

Many people simply became indifferent to official exhortation from any side, and this worked to Mr. Thieu's benefit.

For the son of a small landowner and part-time fisherman, it was a long road to power. Nguyen Van Thieu was born in November 1924, but in accordance with a frequently used Vietnamese custom took another date as his birthday -- April 5, 1923 -- on grounds that it was better luck. He was the youngest of five children, in a village on the central coast of Vietnam.

Mr. Thieu's older brothers helped **put him through schools run by France**, Vietnam's colonial ruler at the time. When World War II ended and the French returned to Vietnam, Mr. **Thieu at first joined with the nationalist Vietminh of Ho Chi Minh.**

He soon became disillusioned. "I knew that the Vietminh were Communists," he once said in an interview. "They shot people, they overthrew the village committees, they seized the land."

Convinced that the Vietminh were dangerous, Mr. Thieu secretly journeyed to Saigon where, with the help of his older brother, Nguyen Van Hieu (whom he later made Saigon's ambassador to Rome), he was admitted to the Merchant Marine Academy. After a year, he received an officer's rating, but he turned down a berth on a ship when he discovered that the French owners intended to pay him a lower salary than they paid their French officers.

He then transferred to the Vietnamese National Military Academy in Da Lat, which the French had established to train officers for the newly created Vietnamese Army they were using to fight the Vietminh. He became a good officer and learned excellent French, but **his experience left him suspicious of all foreigners.**

In 1951, he married the daughter of a prosperous practitioner of native medicine in the Mekong Delta, Nguyen Thi Mai Anh. She was a Roman Catholic, and Mr. Thieu adopted her religion. Later, and conveniently, it was also the predominant religion of the Diem regime.

The Diem family advanced his career, making him commander of the Da Lat Academy, where he formed close ties with many of the men who later became officers in his army.

Power Struggles

After helping overthrow President Diem in 1965 [sic], Mr. Thieu survived a series of coups and countercoups by Saigon's generals, rising steadily to become commander of what was known as

IV Corps, the agriculturally rich area south of Saigon. Here he attracted the attention of American officials who were impressed by his abilities.

In late 1964, he joined with Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky to oust the military government and became a member of the new ruling Armed Forces Council. For the next three years, he and the more outgoing Marshal Ky were rivals for power. Eventually, with American backing, in 1967 Mr. Thieu emerged as the more powerful man and ran for president.

Mr. Thieu's caution and penchant for muddling through a crisis rather than taking swift action may have served him well in Saigon's complex political world, but in 1975, when North Vietnam hurled virtually its entire army on the South in a surprise offensive, his indecision did not work. Faced with the loss of the Central Highlands, splitting South Vietnam in two, he attempted a withdrawal from the isolated area. But he gave unclear orders and never specified what was to be held, what abandoned.

The result was a chaotic rout in which virtually all of South Vietnam's military forces in the Highlands were lost, starting a contagion of panic that soon spread through Saigon's armed forces and to its civilians as well, so that outposts and cities were abandoned without a shot being fired, and soon all those who could be were refugees streaming toward Saigon.

During those final few weeks, Mr. Thieu seemed to retreat farther and farther into his presidential palace, talking to fewer and fewer advisers. Even the top Americans who had sustained him for years seldom saw him in those April days. Just before Mr. Thieu resigned, one senior American official, asked how the president was reacting to his army's setbacks, said, "How should I know?"

In retrospect, said Stanley Karnow, the journalist and author of "Vietnam: A History," **the key moment in Vietnam for the United States was the overthrow of the powerful, but dictatorial and increasingly unpopular Mr. Diem. "At the time, everybody thought it was a good thing, but it was the beginning of the end," Mr. Karnow said. "After that, there was no credible nationalist in South Vietnam, and so we had to use American troops to prop up a flimsy bunch of people in Saigon. It became our war, and we should have left then."**

Efforts to reach Mr. Thieu's family in Boston, including his cousin, Hoang Duc Nha, a former aide in Saigon, were unsuccessful.