

NGUYEN VAN THIEU (1923- ). President of the Republic of Vietnam from 1967 until 1975. Born in a family of farmers and fishermen in Ninh Thuan province, Central Vietnam in 1923, Nguyen Van Thieu served briefly with the Vietminh forces after World War II but later left the revolutionary movement and joined the Vietnamese National Army, organized by the French to serve as the official armed forces of the Associated State of Vietnam.

After service as a combat officer during the Franco-Vietminh War, Nguyen Van Thieu was named superintendent of the National Military Academy in 1956 and later assumed command of the Fifth Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

After the overthrow of the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963, Nguyen Van Thieu, now a general, became involved in politics. In June 1965 he was a member of the "young Turk" movement that overthrew the civilian government in Saigon and was named Chairman of the military-dominated National Leadership Committee.

During the next several months, Thieu shared power with General Nguyen Cao Ky, a fellow member of the "young Turk" faction in Saigon. In September 1967 he was elected President of the Republic of Vietnam under a new constitution approved the previous year. Nguyen Cao Ky served as his Vice President. During the next four years he attempted with only moderate success to bring political stability to South Vietnam and progress in the war against revolutionary forces under the leadership of the Hanoi regime in the North. He did issue a land reform decree entitled "land to the tiller" that severely reduced the inequality of landholdings that had characterized agriculture in South Vietnam since the colonial period.

In 1971 Nguyen Van Thieu was re-elected President for a second four-year term. Technically he was unopposed, although

it was widely believed that other potential candidates were persuaded not to run by the U.S. Mission in Saigon. During his second term Thieu unsuccessfully resisted the U.S. decision to sign the Paris Agreement in January 1973. President Nixon promised to provide adequate military assistance to provide for the defense of South Vietnam, but when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) launched a major military offensive against the South in early 1975, Nixon's successor Gerald Ford was unable to persuade the U.S. Congress to increase U.S. aid to the Saigon regime. After several serious military reverses, Thieu decided to abandon the entire northern half of the country to revolutionary forces. The decision led to panic, and in late April, a few days before North Vietnamese entered Saigon in triumph, Nguyen Van Thieu left South Vietnam for exile in Taiwan. He currently lives in Great Britain. (See Ho Chi Minh Campaign; Ngo Dinh Diem; Nguyen Cao Ky; Republic of Vietnam)