

Thieu
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Impacts of the Arrest and Trial of Tran Ngoc Chau

1. Thieu's (and US) Motives, in Vietnamese Eyes

Why has Thieu shown such determination to strip Chau's immunity and punish him?

Because Chau has been spokesman for the desires of many, probably most, Vietnamese for an end to the fighting, for direct talks with the NLF and political concessions toward coexistence leading to a negotiated settlement. Thieu's backers cannot accept such a policy. His regime almost surely cannot survive peace or an end to American presence and support; without American aid and backing, it could not win in a political competition either with non-communists or with communists. Indeed, Thieu may well fear, as Chau charges, that he would be in immediate jeopardy from the backers of a hard-line anti-communist policy among the Northern Catholics, high army officers and the Americans who constitute the vital core of his narrow support if he should even tolerate such proposals or fail to act vigorously to suppress them. But Chau's silence, Thieu found, could not be bought or coerced. In fact--what seems to have triggered the intense drive from December on to arrest him--he was exposing publicly the operations of Thieu's associate Nguyen Cao Thang to bribe other Assembly members. Chau's voice was protected Constitutionally, as a member of the Assembly. So his immunity had to be destroyed with the help of some colleagues who were more pliable.

The precise charge is a side issue. To have relatives on both sides of the revolutionary conflict is perhaps more common than not; nor are occasional meetings unusual (especially, for example, during the family reunions at Tet). Several members of the current government have brothers who are generals or high officials in North Vietnam, as did General Thang, the Minister of Revolutionary Development whom Chau served as Deputy. One of Thieu's closest advisors at present is a general who, as a Corps Commander, is reported to have received frequent visits from a brother who was one of the highest VC officials in his own Corps area. His successor was reported to have continued these.

Chau's failure to report visits from his brother (this, along with a gift of 30,000 piasters and a car ride on the first visit, is the strongest charge leveled at Chau) is an offense, it is one which Chau admitted publicly at the time of his brother's arrest. But it was not a matter for which his fellow deputies (all of whom had been screened for loyalty and anti-communism before election) were expected to lift his immunity from arrest; nor did they, when this was brought to a vote, at the insistence of Thieu. Despite heavy efforts by Nguyen Cac Thang, only 70 deputies--far short of the 102 required--could be found to censure Chau's actions.

Of course, the independence of the assembly was already jeopardized by manipulative operations to subvert it such as those of Nguyen Cao Thang, the millionaire pharmacist who serves as Thieu's bag man in bribing assembly members (his official role is "liaison"). What seems to have brought on Thieu's determined campaign to eliminate Chau from the assembly, first (unsuccessfully) by vote and then by petition, was precisely Chau's public speeches in the assembly denouncing Thang's actions. Few voices are likely now to follow Chau in this; in such "sensitive" matters, immunity must be regarded a thing of the past. Given their success, and apparent acquiescence by the US Embassy, the very brutality and blatancy of Thieu's tactics hammers home their impact.

A central lesson of the affair for Vietnamese oppositionists will be the lack of an effective restraining influence by the US. Even on matters of principle, legal and constitutional form and procedure, of the sort that the Nixon Administration particularly emphasizes as the aim and justification of our presence, public silence by the US is now to be expected. Vietnamese (and Americans) must infer that if there were private protests by the Ambassador intended to restrain Thieu's aims or even his tactics, they were obviously ineffective, and the US was content to accept this. Barring simple diplomatic or judgmental incompetence, the choice of interpretation seems to be: (a) that the US did not consider the issues, either of principle and form, or of the substantive policies and critiques raised by Chau, sufficiently important to warrant further US intervention (e.g., by public statement, of a sort volunteered frequently on other matters, especially in support of the current regime); (b) that the US actually approves the

course of Thieu's policy, and does not mind this approval being evident; or (c) that the US, perhaps in return for agreement on Vietnamization, has tacitly or explicitly given Thieu a free hand for some period in dealing with his domestic non-communist opposition. These interpretations are not exclusive; they might all be valid. But none of them--including incompetence--can be reassuring to oppositionists who might have relied upon the US presence and stated aims to restrain Thieu from illegal arrests and other coercive pressures in repressing critics of the regime or spokesmen for cease-fire and coexistence.

The very fact that Chau was known to highly-placed officials in the US Government, that US journalists gave major critical play to Thieu's actions, and above all that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and in particular its Chairman, Senator Fulbright, raised the strongest possible criticisms of both Thieu's actions and US acceptance--all this without any apparent effectiveness or restraining influence--strengthen these inferences in the most dramatic way possible.

The inferences of Thai, Chi and myself below are premised upon events proceeding as they have till now, with a continued lack of effective protest by Vietnamese Assemblymen or oppositionists and by the United States. However, the Supreme Court has yet to be heard from, as have the most prominent oppositionists, such as Don and Minh, or Buddhist leadership. The attitude of the lawyers involved in the case, and of some Assemblymen, in response to the somewhat surprising brutality of the actual conduct of Chau's arrest and trial, raises the possibility that there yet may be a strong and perhaps effective challenge to Thieu's moves against the constitutional order. If there is, the position of the United States Government will be of critical importance in determining the outcome. So the evolution below, while probably accurately describing Thieu's intentions, the inferences being drawn by Vietnamese, and even the probable course of events, cannot be regarded as completely determined.

2. Implications for Political Evolution in Vietnam

According to Vu Van Thai, former RVN Ambassador to Washington (27 February 1970): "This is the beginning of a return to a police regime in Saigon. It destroys the credibility of a negotiated settlement in Paris; this has been scuttled by Thieu, leaving only Vietnamization. This is the end of democracy in Saigon, poor as it already was. An assembly that had refused to remove immunity was coerced to voting for it; and the US went along, despite its past association with Chau and knowledge that he was an anti-communist. Anyone advocating coexistence with the communists will now expect to get many years in jail; no one will dare speak of the possibility. It is now known that Thieu can muster the votes and that the US will back Thieu even in illegal matters. The battle was lost before the trial, when Thieu was allowed to use enough pressure and coercion and corruption to get a three-fourths vote; now the independence of the national assembly has been destroyed."

The policy symbolized by the pursuit of Chau means the end of hopes of the peaceful evolution of the GVN, via freedom of expression, political organization, and the elections of 1970-71, toward a regime that would be willing effectively to seek an end to the fighting, and one that might be capable of competing effectively with the communists.

A non-communist, nationalist government truly representing the majority of the population of South Vietnam would be likely to express popular desires for an end to the fighting. It would thus act to bring about a political competition with the communists, and that would entail inescapably a significant, perhaps a strong risk of eventual communist domination. This risk would be a sufficient reason for the present Saigon regime and perhaps for the present US Administration (like past ones) to block its emergence.

Yet at the same time, such a broadly representative government could offer the only real hope of confronting the communists effectively enough in such competition to avert communist domination without relying upon continued American presence or support. This possibility would be especially strong if the non-communists had time and freedom to organize starting early

in the course of an American withdrawal, i.e., profiting from a year or so of American presence. The very risk posed by a communist open political challenge is probably essential to (though no guarantee of) an evolution toward cohesion of the non-communist factions in SVN that form the majority of the population: as Vietnamese like Chau and Vu Van Thai have long argued. Beyond that a non-communist-dominated regime would offer the best hope of providing dignity and justice to the war-oppressed and weary Vietnamese people, in a way that could begin to justify the sacrifices suffered and inflicted by our own participation in the conflict.

Yet the current policy of Thieu, if it continues to be supported by the US Government, means a decisive choice by both Administrations against any such evolution. It means the choice of an authoritarian regime based upon police repression and military power, upon the support of a narrow group of Vietnamese factions excluding all others, above all upon the continued support and presence of the Americans.

What the future seems to hold for South Vietnam is not a new form of politics--a promise that seemed more vivid in 1968-69 than at any other time--but a return to a very familiar form. "Diemism... Diemism without Diem" is a description that comes inevitably to the minds of Vietnamese, and of those Americans with longest experience in Vietnamese affairs: thus, in this country, Vu Van Thai, Hoang Van Chi, Milton Sacks, Ed Lansdale and Rufus Phillips. "Diemism" is not merely an epithet, nor a casual historical allusion. It means a number of precise characteristics, all now foreseen as sharply as they were experienced in the past in the latter days of the Diem regime:

- a) narrow-based, exclusionist politics;
- b) specifically, a political base drawn from elements of Northern Catholics and other refugees, the army, the governmental bureaucracy, and above all, the US;
- c) with respect to other factions--Buddhist, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Montagnard, Khmer, students, unions, the peasants and the poor in general--

exclusion from power, repression, divide-and rule tactics of subversion, manipulation, coercion and bribery;

- d) repression of significant political opposition, suppression of freedom of speech, the press (censorship), political activity and organization, harrassment of political parties;
- e) disregard, subversion, or destruction of constitutional forms: rigged elections, political arrests, destruction of the independence or influence of the National Assembly or the Supreme Court;
- f) a rigid anti-communist policy, excluding co-existence or concessions upon which a negotiated settlement might be based, preventing contacts between the two sides (except possibly, privately, at the highest levels): thus, indefinite continuation of the war, financed primarily by the United States.

Hoang Van Chi's (author of "From Colonialism to Communism") first comment on the affair (28 February 1970): "the situation is the same as under Diem; an American policy is always to back one against all others." The VC are weaker, Chi believes; they suffered from a serious political set-back at Tet from 1968, when they lost the sympathy of many people. For that very reason, "this is the right moment to develop politically in Saigon." Instead, there will be a more repressive regime in Saigon; "that will not work" despite VC weakness, there will be internal trouble. A stalemate will result; with Saigon weaker, President Nixon will not be able to withdraw.

"Under Diem, there were fewer rich landlords and far fewer businessmen rich from the war; the army, too, is stronger." Chi sees South Vietnam becoming like the Philippines in socio-political terms: "latinized" (i.e., like Latin America)--ruled by junta of military, catholics, landlords. "Such a regime cannot be democratized. No reform is possible. It cannot compete with North Vietnam in the long run."

In destroying the dignity and independence of the national assembly, the one institution (perhaps, on either side of the Vietnamese conflict) that, within limits, truly represents the voice of the voice of the people, Thieu has struck at what Milton Sacks has described as "the single basis of legitimacy of his government." The blatant neglect (so far) of the role of the Supreme Court points in the same direction, as do the proceedings of Chau's two military trials: Thieu has simply chosen to discard legitimacy, to rule without it. In full public view, one might say, the Emperor has taken off his clothes.

In the reversion to Diemism, one element is lacking: family rule, a factor of both strength and weakness. In its place we have (conditioned by the other political elements mentioned by Chi) a return to something like the military politics of 1965-67, rule by what Vu Van Thai (who served as Ambassador to Washington during that period) calls "the gang."

3. Negotiations

The circumstances surrounding Chau's loss of immunity and his arrest and conviction gravely undermined the previously slim chances of a negotiated settlement in Paris, for a number of reasons:

a. The circumstances strongly support communist claims that they cannot expect fair elections to be conducted while the Thieu regime wields police power in South Vietnam. Indeed, the performance of the Thieu Government, and of the US Government, in this case seem to contradict the possibility that even the physical safety of communists participating openly in political competition could be assured, even by "guarantee" of the US or an international commission. If the US, which has over 400,000 troops in Vietnam, cannot induce the Thieu regime to observe guarantees provided in the Vietnamese Constitution, and cannot assure the physical safety of a man known to many Americans to be a dedicated anti-communist who has, moreover, cooperated closely with American agencies in the past, an American guarantee of the lives of communist foes of the current regime could hardly be reassuring.

b. Thieu's treatment of Chau will probably achieve what is undoubtedly its main intent: to intimidate and silence other Vietnamese spokesmen for the views Chau was punished for expressing: in particular, calling for a cease-fire, direct negotiations with the NLF, and acceptance of coexistence with the communists. Even prestigious members of the National Assembly, with supposed immunity from arrest, must now expect that their immunity will be stripped by a similar process of coercion and bribery of their colleagues, and a prison settlement awarded, if they should express such opinions (and perhaps even more surely if they should follow Chau in exposing publicly this very process of subversion of the assembly). Without non-communist spokesmen for an end to the fighting to press both the Thieu regime and the US Government in this direction, the chance for movement for negotiated settlement seems even more remote than before.

Thieu's policy shows a clear intent to monopolize governmental power in the hands of a narrow group, which coincides with those least willing to see any reduction in US presence or aid or indeed, an end of the war that would bring about such a reduction. This same grouping of forces will accept no compromise of a rigid anti-communist policy that precludes concessions required for negotiated settlement. US policy, in turn, that predicates any agreement with North Vietnam or the NLF upon its acceptance by this regime, cannot lead to successful negotiations.

c. Thieu's behavior will be interpreted--almost surely correctly--as a sure warning of pressures to be brought to bear upon political opponents, especially those who choose to express the popular side of these controversial issues of war and peace, as the regime approaches the 1970 elections. Thus, both public debate on these matters and candidates identified with views like Chau's are likely to be lacking in the election campaign, from a combination of deterrence and actual pressure. This radically reduces the chance of increased voice and strength for such views in the Assembly after the elections of 1970 or 1971, with the same effect as (2) above.

d. Of greatest importance, this event signals a policy that puts time on the side of the communists. Given their assumption that American forces will leave Vietnam eventually, the communists' main concern is with political evolution within Vietnam pending their departure. Thieu's current policy can only reassure them (not to their surprise) that the present regime, like most of its predecessors in Saigon, will move firmly to disperse and repress non-communist factions in Vietnam (other than the minority of elements that now form its narrow base of support). In other words, the communist can relax, observing there is little danger of an unprecedented evolution of the non-communists--probably a popular majority in numbers--toward cohesion and self-confidence; the one hypothetical trend that could really worry them, pressing them into reaching a settlement sooner rather than later. With no fear that time was working against them in the political dimension, the one they watch most carefully, the communist can pursue survival or economy of force tactics militarily, match our own unconcern with negotiations in Paris, and wait for American withdrawal. (They might instead choose to try to speed that withdrawal by reinfiltrating and increasing US casualties, but political trends will not force that option upon them.)

3. US silence and apparent passivity with respect to Thieu's emerging policy can only strengthen all of the above effects, signifying endorsement or at least acquiescence in Thieu's repressive and divisive tactics to Vietnamese on both sides of the conflict.

4. Vietnamization

Our repeated experience in South Vietnam with narrow-based, authoritarian rule, is more than adequate for predictions of its impact; its consequences are almost certain to undermine the requirements for successful Vietnamization.

From 1965 to 1967, while we hoped, first, to avert defeat and then to win victory on the basis of American bombing and American troops rather than Vietnamese efforts, all we really asked of the GVN was that it exist as a facade legitimizing our presence and efforts in Vietnam, avoiding an appearance of chaos that would dishearten the American public or a "neutralist" government that would call for an end to the war. But a policy that calls for the Vietnamese to take over

an increasing burden of the war, even against a weakened opponent, demands much more than this. And the constitutional regime in office since the elections of 1967 seemed plausibly to be offering more, whether or not it would ultimately be capable of continuing the struggle entirely upon its own. But to return to the Diemist politics and practices signaled by the Chau arrest holds out no such promise.

An authoritarian government with the Diemist base of Catholics, Army and US can, perhaps keep itself in power with the presence and support of 100,000 or more US troops: until it is paralyzed by the division and apathy, or overthrown by the opposition of non-communist factions. The aim of Vietnamization--a stable, improving government that can command the loyalties and mobilize the energies of its own apparatus and of a sufficient part of the population to maintain broad and increasing access in the countryside, containing communist opposition despite the gradual withdrawal of US presence--will never be reached by this route. Instead, it promises, as in the past, exclusion of men of talent, initiative and respect from the administrative process, and the impotence of the legislative process. It diverts police and administrative energy and attention away from the communist challenge to the monitoring, manipulating and suppressing of non-communist opposition, leading in the short run to division and apathy and in the longer run to open revolt that either overthrows or paralyzes the regime. This is not the sort of governmental base that will allow its military arm to take over the major burden of the fighting from the Americans. Yet it insures that the war will go on, till there is a decisive shift in the politics of the regime.

As discussed earlier, these developments preclude successful negotiations, or an effective political role for factions willing and able to compete in open political competition with the communists. Barring a change in US policy that makes direct negotiations promising or that shifts US support in Saigon away from the current regime, and barring a chaotic collapse of the present Saigon regime, or its successful overthrow by factions desiring an end to the

fighting, these developments rule out an end to the fighting and leave Vietnamization as the only basis for the reduction or elimination of US participation for that fighting. But if Vietnamization is distinguished from unilateral withdrawal by making the rate and extent of our withdrawals contingent upon the effective capability of the Vietnamese government and military forces to take over the military struggle successfully, then these political developments mean that the policy of Vietnamization will fail in the coming months and years to extricate US military forces from this conflict.

The commitment by the present Administration to Vietnamization instead of unilateral withdrawal (or acceptance of a compromise settlement that might actually be attainable in Paris), indicates that, like previous Administrations, it attaches great importance to ruling out the possibility of communist domination of South Vietnam, even at the cost of prolonging American presence and participation in the conflict. Yet a Thieu regime, as it is evolving, will almost surely continue to present indefinitely an American President the dilemma either of prolonging still further a major American direct involvement in the war, or of withdrawing US support with a high probability (increasing over time) of ensuing communist domination.

The first option, prolonging our stay, not only increases the risk of encountering eventually a reescalated communist military challenge, but will probably increasingly involve us in the process of supporting an ugly and unpopular government against popular discontent. This could mean not only financial and moral support, but use of American transportation, advisors at various levels, communications, and even the threat, deployment and use of American firepower and troops, all in the cause of countering non-communist factions with more or less genuine grievances. Our help will be solicited by the regime on the grounds that the challenging forces are infiltrated, and are being led or exploited, by communists. With increasing probability over time, this charge may indeed be true, to greater or less extent (a consequence of current policy). Charges may again be made, with some degree of truth, that the rebellion has been encouraged, and its impact magnified, by American news media, by journalists' criticisms of the regime and publicity to oppositionists' aims and actions.

Yet the publicity may have been reporting substantially the truth. Finally, some of the offending policies against which the oppositionists have been rallying may have been concurred in or even advised by the US Government.

For both these latter reasons, the regime will claim plausibly that the US has a moral responsibility to assist it in putting down these threats to "stability." But the most compelling reason for such US support will be that after months or years of political policies, accepted by the US, dividing and repressing most of the non-communist factions (other than Catholics) that might successfully compete with the communists, the prospective downfall of the regime we have supported will seem to offer a certainty of communist takeover.

Tacit US approval of the course Thieu is following would seem to be based on the premise: "There was nothing wrong with Diemism that 100,000 US troops can't cure." This might be right, if the US is willing to keep 100,000 troops--or perhaps twice that many, if current political policies prevent improvements in GVN and RVNAF--in Vietnam indefinitely. (Public acceptance would have to survive evidence of the repressiveness and unpopularity of the Thieu regime, its limited effectiveness in the countryside due to political weakness and division, and possibly overt challenges to its rule which reduced it to a shell even if its main figures remained in place.) But it is probably not true even then. A more probable outcome is that it would hold together against communist pressure, with large-scale US help, only until it was overthrown by non-communist opposition.

In the opinion of Rufus Phillips, this could come quite soon: "Perhaps before June." (The assassination of Thieu, perhaps by a young Army officer, Phillips notes as a growing possibility.) We could not be, even with a large US presence, sure of averting or suppressing such a revolt, Phillips believes, and certainly we would be no more able to preserve the functioning effectiveness of the current regime in the face of such revolt than we were able to do so with the KY regime in 1966, when we had several hundred thousand troops in Vietnam. Although RVNAF is larger than it was at that time,

or earlier in the Diem regime, it is no more coherent than before, Phillips believes, and strong divisions would show up in any crisis.

Vu Van Thai generally agrees. "Thieu is not of the stature to maintain a police state successfully." Although Thai believes that opposition would take at least several more months to digest and react to the Chau case (and other current acts of repression), "in one year or two there will be a rebellion to destroy him, most likely from the students." Much of the army would be in sympathy. "The army is changing with Vietnamization and mobilization: there are many dedicated Nationalists among the new, young Army officers (and many others who simply resent being called up)." This time the Buddhists will probably be behind the students: they are now under too close surveillance by Thieu, and CIA, to be in the vanguard.

Hoang van Chi foresees a similar course of events, but expects it later, after the bulk of US forces have withdrawn. "The Buddhists and students are more experienced now; they learned from the 1966 Struggle. Now they will not move while the US is still there, and while they believe the US will support Thieu. The 1966 Struggle happened because Tri Quang believed that President Johnson would act like Kennedy, withdrawing support from the Ky regime in the face of his opposition." They are more realistic now, Chi believes.

Thus, US support for the Thieu Government in its current approach will raise internal pressures for open non-communist revolt against the regime, and at the same time condemn us to help deter or suppress such revolts. Such efforts perhaps can succeed in preserving a facade--as did our help to Ky in 1966 in suppressing the 1966 struggle--but, as then, at the cost of prolonged paralysis of the GVN, during which, virtually the whole burden of opposing the communists would fall upon the remaining US forces. The exact outcome of that military confrontation would depend upon the size of US forces remaining, the readiness of the communist forces to exploit the situation (including prior infiltration), and the involvement of RVNAF in the internal struggle. RVNAF might not only be diverted to the task of repressing enemies of the Thieu regime or holding itself in readiness for coups or counter-coups,

but might actually launch into internal conflict between units or across a "generation gap" dividing newly-mobilized junior officers against the high command.

Even if something like the present regime should survive such a political crisis, with our help, it would be in so weakened a state that a continued US presence would increasingly have the aspect of a US military occupation, in support of a remnant gang. To support Thieu's current policy is to encourage the development of a Saigon Government that will not let the war end, will not let us go, that cannot survive without US help against both communist and non-communist opposition, and that less and less justifies further American (or Vietnamese) sacrifices in its behalf.

The US military force will more than ever continue to be "needed," if we deem it in our interest to prevent communist domination. But such an interest, however important, hardly be claimed to be so "vital" as to justify our pursuing it violently on Vietnamese soil indefinitely in disregard to the desires of the Vietnamese themselves. Yet the request by a government of the character, the narrow backing, and the precise political bent of the Thieu regime goes almost no part of the way toward legitimizing continued US military operations on and over Vietnamese soil and population. That is already the case, and would be still more so after the foreseeable political crises. With the constitutional basis of the Saigon regime undermined to that extent, our role in Vietnam would become no more legitimate than that of the French after 1946. Already, the blatant manipulation and intimidation of the assembly in connection with Chau's arrest, mocks--so blatantly as to amount to an insult--repeated assertions by the President and his Secretaries of State and Defense that our principal purpose in continuing our efforts in Vietnam is to support and promote "self-determination": "the one non-negotiable requirement for an end to the war."

If "self-determination" is indeed the principal aim of continuing our presence and involvement--and Administration emphasis upon it indicates a judgment that it is the best if not only basis for justifying or legitimizing our involvement--then one can only conclude that our principal aim is being

thwarted and countered by the efforts of our allies to suppress representative institution in Saigon. In other words, it would appear unmistakably that our aims and those of the Thieu regime were in conflict, and it would be up to the President to adjust our policies accordingly.

But perhaps, such emphasis is rhetorical rather than central to our policymaking. Probably our policy focuses more upon US interests, and specifically upon blocking communism rather than safeguarding self-determination. If so, the Administration is, in my opinion, tragically mistaken if it believes : these interests can be served--without a large, highly active and indefinitely prolonged US involvement--by support of a Saigon Government so lacking in legitimacy or popular support. A Vietnamization policy whose political component has this aspect will simply fail to build a government that can survive without a US presence, both to combat the communists and to intervene in internal non-communist politics. And it will fail to maintain a GVN presence outside the cities as broad as at present, whether or not VC/NVA weakness persists.

Given absolute dependence of this regime upon American support, and the potential influence this permits and justifies, our acceptance of Thieu's present course of action without effective intervention or even protest means that we will be seen--correctly--to collaborate in destroying the one institution in the government that is genuinely representative of majority of the population. Indeed, only the existence of such a body, one that could speak freely on subjects of war and peace and on allied presence and strategy, could by its invitation truly legitimize US participation in the conflict. Chau himself often made this point before the existence of constituent or national assembly, arguing that for this reason the US should welcome their establishment. To destroy independence or free expression of this institution is to deprive our continued presence of this basis of legitimacy.

If we encourage, or simply accept in silence and passivity, a Diemist style of government, we are saying to the Vietnamese

and to ourselves that our purposes in Vietnam do not call for legitimacy--either of the Saigon regime or of our own presence--or for observance of law, for freedom of speech or of political activity, for popular voice or representation. Yet if our purpose is to block communism in Vietnam by a cynical "pragmatic" approach, if it aims at building an anti-communist, authoritarian regime in Vietnam that is both strong and stable though narrow-based, needing neither broad popular support nor American presence: then our policy pursues a chimera, and not for the first time in Vietnam. That would be asking Americans to die in order to substitute for a possible communist dictatorship, a military dictatorship so weak in popular support and its own self-confidence it will never be able to stand alone against communist or non-communist opposition. At best, with continued communist weakness, the rate of US casualties may go down: yet with this policy, there is no end to the war, and hence no definite limit to the total fatalities the US may suffer (or inflict).

In suppressing non-communist alternatives to his rule by methods that increase the unpopularity and fragility of his regime and his dependence upon US support, Thieu may actually strengthen his own position--the "strength of weakness"--in bargaining with the US to prolong the US presence and to assure unlimited support for his rule. Thieu wants us to stay, wants our support to continue, and does not want open competition or coexistence with the communists. Therefore, it is in his interests to show us clearly that his government cannot survive our departure, while showing us at the same time that there is no viable non-communist alternative. If he makes the former more likely while achieving the latter, that is an advantage, not a cost, in terms of his own interests.

Yet even if this coincides with our own short-run interest in "stability" (i.e., in avoiding changes in the regime, whether brought about constitutionally or otherwise, that might confuse and dampen American public tolerance of our continued involvement), this policy involves direct conflict with the longer run aims of the Vietnamization policy: the aim of leaving Vietnam, but leaving it with a government that was worth our sacrifices, and one that can survive to fight

or negotiate or coexist with communists without us. It points to the most malignant outcome of "Vietnamization": endless war and endless US participation in it to support an unpopular and corrupt military dictatorship.

In these circumstances, a US policy to avert a communist dictatorship in Vietnam by support of a military dictatorship will not extricate the US from the conflict; nor will it justify past or further American efforts and costs. Compared to policies that might bring an end to the war, or to US participation in it, it will mean many more American deaths--and Vietnamese deaths inflicted by Americans -- in a cause increasingly unworthy of these sacrifices.