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SAIGON--The political alliance between Presidential candidate candidate General Nguyen Van Thieu and his running mate, Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, is still freakishly fragile.

If the military ticket is elected to the Presidency on Septab September 3, observers here predict the rivalry between the two generals will result in a significant, though sub-surface, power struggle for the next four years.

One Vietnamese politician described the current Thieu-Ky rivalry in these mystical terms:

"Never, never do two suns rise in the East in one morning. But, here politically, Ky and Thieu are operating against the laws of nature--both of them trying to be ~~their own~~ suns. They'll end up destroying each other."

The Vietnamese politician was alluding to the daily rumors that one of the two generals would withdraw from the Presidential ticket, sabotaging the other, and thus destroying both.

Though the two generals mend their fences well enough to ~~fer~~ fend off the maneuvers of the other ten civilian Presidential candidates, there is still bitter in-fighting between their two camps.

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Doope

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It is the relatively insignificant, almost invisible things, which continue to exacerbate the rivalries among the two leaders. Shortly after Ky agreed to step down as a Presidential candidate and run as Thieu's Vice President, the Thieu supporters discredited Ky by bombarding rumors around town that Ky's former running mate had attempted to commit suicide by ~~taken~~ taking an overdose of sleeping pills. This infuriated the Ky camp and his running mate finally denied the story to local newspapers.

Thieu's supporters poured more fuel on the shoulders by praising Thieu's former Vice Presidential running mate as a "national hero" for stepping down from the ticket, instead of placing the laurels ~~at~~ publically at Ky's feet for withdrawing from the race.

Then, there was the behind-the-scenes struggle for the joint Thieu-Ky campaign fund. Thieu had told friends and a few Western journalists that he was too poor to campaign and Ky had all the money. Thieu's supporters wanted Ky to fork over his campaign funds--totaling ~~city~~ sixty million piastres piastres, or half million dollars, even though Thieu was running for the top post. Ky's supporters refused, arguing Thieu was not a poor man and could scrap up his own campaign funds. Ky planned to use his funds to support candidates favorable to him in the sixty-man Senate, also to be elected on September 3.

By the time the issue was ironed out, the wealthy contributors to Ky's campaign fund withdrew their funds from the various banks in Saigon, which left both Ky and Thieu holding a stack of worthless blank checks.

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Thieu and Ky were never exceptionally close, although for two years Thieu served as ceremonial chief of state and chairman of the military junta, while Ky served as Prime Minister through the crucial period of the American military buildup here. For two years, they maintained the public image of harmony, going so far as to play weekly foursomes of mah-jong with their wives in order to maintain some, if only shallow, personal consultations.

Seldom have two Vietnamese generals been more unlike in personality or political methods, although both are consid considered staunchly pro-American anti- and anti-Communist.

Ky, a 36-year year-old pilot, was a razzle-dazzle general, consistently popping off with flamboyant, if not sometimes nonsensical, statements. He was open, direct and spoke with frankness, a trait that appealed to the American officialdom here. He gradually learned politicking with the Vietnamese peasants in the style of an American hand-shaking campaigner. One could imagine him easily being transplanted into a California constituency and holding his own with housewives in a supermarket or with the Berkeley peace-niks. But, he would have been a minority President; he was a Northern refugee leading the Southerners and Central Vietnamese in a country where regional differences are as important and bitter as they were in America during the Civil War.

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Deeps

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If elected, Thieu would also be a minority President. Regionally, he was born in Central Vietnam, but he is a Roman Catholic, converted during marriage, in a non-Catholic country. His religion is a serious disadvantage, for it raises the emotional ghosts of another era--when President Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic, ruled Vietnam from 1955 to 1963. Buddhist priests led a popular revolt against him. Thieu, although a Catholic, was commander of the Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division, based near Saigon, which, along with Vietnamese Marines, spearheaded the coup that toppled Diem. Because of the enormous controversy about Diem, the current Vatican line is to avoid supporting a Catholic President during the Vietnamese elections. Thieu has all the disadvantages of being a Catholic, yet none of the advantages of their bloc vote during the election.

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Taciturn and meditative, Thieu, as a campaigner, would have had the style and grace of a Vietnamese Calvin Coolidge. One American who saw both Ky and Thieu address new cadets observed: "Thieu gave a good speech, said all the right things and nobody cared. Ky got up and said nothing logical, but all the Vietnamese were hooping and hollering at it."

Machiavelli

Thieu is a master at intrigue--a Machev Machavelli with a mandarin touch. He has, thus far, perfected the primary dictum of Vietnamese politics--namely, to survive personally, whether the country does or not. Of the original hand-ful of generals instrumental in overthrowing Diem in 1963, only Thieu remains in power; many have seized power, but none except Thieu have held it.

The French-educated Vietnamese salon politicians have but one term for Thieu--louvoyeur--meaning "he's the best sailor in any kind of wind." If the wind is too strong, he'll go downwind in order to go upstream later." Others call him "a politician who can walk in four directions at one time." Few, however, have ever labelled him as trum cheng (hiding head under a blanket), a favorite Vietnamese expression for the cowardly un-committed. Even when he is neutral, Thieu is said to be actively neutral.

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Throughout the summer, the mah-jong games continued, but Thieu Thieu and Ky moved further apart when each had announced their candidacies for the Presidency. Then, U. S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker demanded one candidate withdrawn to preserve the unity of the Vietnamese armed forces. Bunker said the Americans officially would be neutral in the decision between the two candidates, which, in effect, withdrew America's long-standing support from Ky.

American support is a vital political element here; that support being measured in the most oddball, minute and subjective ways by the Vietnamese. One example was Ambassador Bunker's inviting a number of Vietnamese civilian politicians to a light lunch to meet Assistant Secretary of state Nicholas Katzenbach during the <sup>D.B.</sup> Fort McNamara visit. Among the Vietnamese Vietnamese civilian politicians were three candidates for the Presidency--Phan Khac Suu, Ha Thuc Ky and Tran Van Huong. The other civilian candidates--13 at the time--were ignored by the Ambassador and immediately their political stock diminished to the point that they were labelled ung cu vien lam ca canh (ornamentation candidates).

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American support is one of the only two sources of real political power in the non-Communist arena, the second source being derived from the masses. Thus far, no candidate, civilian or military, has demonstrated any over-whelming, over-riding support from the Vietnamese population. The candidates are not differentiated thus far on the basis of party platforms, ideology or personal convictions of how the war is to be waged or the peace to be sought. Though there are hundreds of political parties in name in Vietnam, there are none in fact; <sup>for</sup> those in name have more leaders than followers.

The political impasse faced by America in Vietnam is that no non-Communist, nation-wide political, religious or social grouping has any substantial support among the Vietnamese population, especially ~~thus~~ among the rural peasants and the low-class urban workers. The Vietnamese army is the only structural apparatus running from the central government to the villages for administrative purposes--but not for rousing political enthusiasm or establishing political policies. Without any clear expression of the issues <sup>before</sup> of the population, the Vietnamese election ~~thus~~ thus ~~sticks~~ the ~~do form~~ ~~ed~~ of democracy without insuring its ~~an~~ critical substance.

Hence, on June 28, the Ky-Thieu confrontation before the meeting of the generals revolved around the personalities of the two men and the loyalties of the other generals to them without reference to the bloody relevancies of the war.

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Early in the morning, the Vietnamese generals funneled into Saigon from their division and corps commands in the provinces, at least one of them coming in by a special jet of the American Ambassador based in the northern provinces, others coming in by their own private aircraft.

In all, 48 generals were present at the opening of the week meeting, the most majority being Army generals, as was Thieu, with only a handful of Air Force generals; some represented service commands, such as the engineering corps, others were staff officers at the Vietnamese High Command, where the meeting was taking place, but easily the most powerful were the command commanders of combat units, such as the Vietnamese Marines, divisions and above them the four corps commanders. Their basis of power was the raw power of fudge guns and men, which has lead more than one civilian politician to observe, "Those with big guns shout; those with little guns whisper; those without guns keep silent."

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The meeting had been called by Lt. Gen. Cao Van Vietn Viet Vien, chief of the Vietnamese High Command, for the ~~accoun~~ announced--but largely ~~diplomatic--purpose~~ of discussing how to improve leadership in the Vietnamese armed forces. Soon, the political purpose of the meeting was mentioned--that leadership the Vietnamese armed forces could not improve in leadership as long as both Ky and Thieu ran as separate candidates, thus ~~creating~~ creating divisions among the troops.

Maj. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang, the commander of the Third Military Military Corps which surrounds Saigon, proposed nullifying the constitution and arresting the "troublemakers," in the provisional provisional legislative assembly. Concurrently, commander of the Vietnamese Marines, the toughest unit in Vietnam, he was as ~~disputed with~~ rambunctious against civilian politicians and against the Viet Cong on the battlefield. Others promptly disagreed and his proposal got lost in the shuffle of conversation.

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Lt.  
Maj. Gen. Vinh Loc, commander of the corps just north of Khang's and a relative to the former imperial family, proposed only one military candidate should run in the election. Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duc Thang, super-minister in charge of the crucial Revolutionary Development Program, told the other generals Ky and Thieu could not compromise among themselves, so they must make the decision as to which general should withdraw.

Gene  
Maj. Gen. <sup>van</sup> Nguyen Vy, # no. 2 staff general at the High Command, proposed both candidates withdraw and concentrate on the military war, leaving the Armed Forces to arbitrate the election among the civilians. Then, the meeting broke up for lunch, with Ky eating <sup>HTE</sup> ate with the other generals, while Thieu went to his home nearby. Then Ky returned to his office.

In the afternoon, the meeting resumed, with Thieu and Ky both asked to attend. Thieu spoke first. He said he was sad that the other generals had abandoned him. This morning when he came to the High Command, the other officers looked at him with contempt; for, after all, most of his statements, even though he was chief of state, had been censored by Ky's subordinates. While he knew he would lose in the election, he refused to withdraw from the Presidential race because of his personal honor and ~~honor~~ the honor of the Armed Forces.

Thieu then proceeded to weep, the tears rolling down his cheeks. He didn't bother to wipe them off, and continued to talk despite the sobs in his throat.

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Ky, who is basically a sentimentalist, was moved and volunteered to withdraw from the race. Marine commander Khang, one of Ky's friends and classmates, objected. <sup>LT</sup> Maj. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, who had received his third star only the day before the meeting, also objected. The Two Corps Commander, Vinh Loc, also objected. Others were silent. Marine commander Khang proposed that Thieu should withdraw, since he was better in military military affairs than Ky. Thieu again refused. Then the meeting broke up.

On the morning of the <sup>second</sup> ~~same~~ day--only 36 hours before the final listing of Presidential candidates--the discussion centered around the advisability of allowing <sup>EX-GENERAL</sup> Maj. Gen. ~~Duro~~ Duong Van Minh, leader of the first junta that overthrew Dien, to return from his exile in Thailand and run for the Presidency. Ky opposed violently. Thieu and one other general agreed. The other ~~generals~~ generals rallied around Ky and they agreed to block the return of Minh on the grounds of national security security. The afternoon was ~~spot~~ spent on trivial discussions of military tactics and ~~strag~~ strategy, with no decision being reached about the candidacy of the two Presidential hope-fuls.

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Sixteen

On Friday morning--only ~~nine~~ <sup>sixteen</sup> hours before final filing time-- the meeting again resumed. By this time, most of the ten division commanders had returned to their base areas, leaving only the corps commanders, service and branch commanders and staff generals, ~~numbering~~ <sup>numbering</sup> roughly a dozen.

Thieu ~~has~~ spoke first and brought up the matter ~~than~~ <sup>said</sup> subordinates of Ky, and his police chief, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, were charged with being corrupt. He brought with him dossiers, presumably dealing with these corrupt subordinates, but did not refer to them. Loan, Ky's closest supporter and his former ~~deputy~~ Air Force commander, slipped out of the room, grinning sheepishly.

Maj. Gen. Lam, commander of the northernmost corps where U. S. Marines are fighting, popped up and said everyone was ~~talking~~ talking too much while this tragedy existed in the Armed Forces. He ripped off his three stars, one of them only three days old, plopped the insignia on the table and said he would refuse to return to his corps until the deal deadlock was broken. Two other corps commanders followed suit.

Thieu again spoke and again cried. He said he was moved by the loyalty of the three corps commanders and that he would remain in the Presidential race because of his honor.

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Ky then started crying and said he would withdraw. The other generals clamored around, praising him for his personal sacrifice to save the armed forces. But withdrawal wasn't enough. Others suggested he Ky run as Vice President with Thieu as President. Ky again agreed.

Thieu then said that even though he and Ky would run on the Presidential ticket, the armed forces would still be responsible for running the country, even with a civilian legislative assembly in the making. He proposed the Armed Forces Council of generals continue to meet and that Ky ~~become head~~ become head of the Council. Thieu proposed that all the generals present sign a pledge to make Ky chairman of the military council in the future. All agreed. Then Thieu proposed that the name of the future prime minister should be approved by the military ~~council~~ council before it be sent to the ~~the~~ future legislative assembly, and he further proposed that military supporters should make a dash to the election committee to file for the senatorial campaign.

The meeting broke up at 10:30 a.m. Before Ky had time to have second thoughts about the matter, Thieu supporters leaked the news to Western journalists.

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In the afternoon, reliable sources report an American intelligence officer saw Ky and handed him a cable from Washington stating the U. S. position was to support Ky after all. Ky said he regretted he had withdrawn from the race.

"If that cable had come a few hours earlier, I'd never have withdrawn," <sup>Ky</sup> He told an aide.

To which another supporter exclaimed, "These damn Americans are really Hollywood people. They're copying this whole election from an Alfred Hitchcock suspense movie. Who knows what they'll do next?"