

Tran Thien Khiem, 95, Dies; a Power in South Vietnam Before Its Fall

For six years he was the nation's second in command, a master of political intrigue who had plotted and thwarted coups before fleeing the Communist victory in 1975.

By Robert D. McFadden

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Gen. Tran Thien Khiem, who was second in command to President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam during the last six years of the Vietnam War and fled to the United States shortly before the fall of Saigon to Communist forces in 1975, died on June 23 in Orange County, Calif. He was 95.

His death, in a nursing home in the Irvine area, where he was recovering from a fall, was confirmed by a close colleague, former Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khac Binh. General Khiem had largely disappeared from public view since the war and had been living in San Jose, Calif.

A mastermind of political intrigue, General Khiem (pronounced k'yem) was South Vietnam's premier from 1969 until the regime's dying days, a career military officer and a hidden hand of power during much of America's two-decade involvement in the war. He helped plot or thwart several military coups in his country in the 1960s.

With the tacit approval of President John F. Kennedy and the Central Intelligence Agency, General Khiem reluctantly helped arrange the 1963 military coup that ended in the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was a despot but who was also an old friend whose life he had tried to spare in what he and the Kennedy administration had expected to be a bloodless coup.

General Khiem, who had a deceptively unassuming manner, was Saigon's ambassador to the United States and Taiwan for four years. He then held portfolios that controlled the police; the civil service; a home guard of 1.5 million men; and an American-South Vietnamese "pacification program" intended to win the "hearts and minds" of people living in hamlets thought to be controlled by enemy guerrillas.

As President Thieu's right-hand man, General Khiem cracked down on the regime's opponents and politically shouldered aside supporters of Mr. Thieu's archrival, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, a former air force chief. General Khiem was the government's toughest policy executor and a darling of the United States Embassy.

In 1969, he was rewarded by President Thieu, a former general who was another of his close friends, with two promotions — in March to deputy premier, and in August to premier. As a four-star general, he was also the country's highest-ranking military officer.

His appointment as premier put another uniform into the ruling triumvirate, a military regime with civilian window dressing, and strengthened Saigon's resistance to any peace overtures.



Premier Khiem, right, with President Nguyen Van Thieu, center, in Saigon in September 1970. As President Thieu's right-hand man, he led a crackdown on the regime's opponents. Bettmann, via Getty Images

Over the next few years, the United States, under antiwar pressure at home, began removing its troops and financial support from South Vietnam. North Vietnam said it would never negotiate with the Thieu regime, and Saigon lost increasing ground in the war. But a buoyant Mr. Khiem was at Mr. Thieu's side to greet visiting dignitaries like President Richard M. Nixon and members of his cabinet.

As corruption thrived in South Vietnam, Mr. Khiem named relatives to lucrative jobs in the civil administration. As American investigators and news media reported, he appointed two brothers to customs enforcement posts that let them profit handsomely from the smuggling of drugs and other contraband at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport and the nation's ports. One brother-in-law became mayor of Saigon; another relative became the national police director.

As inflation soared, Mr. Khiem invoked economic austerity measures and greater pacification efforts. In 1971, he insisted that 90 percent of the population was living in relative security. But within a year, facing rising popular resistance, the government abolished most elections and said that local officials, from province leaders down to hamlet chiefs, would be appointed by the regime.

By 1973, larger issues were looming. A peace accord was signed in Paris by North Vietnam, the United States and, reluctantly, President Thieu, who regarded the deal as an American betrayal of its promise of support. America's direct involvement in the war ended. But after a cease-fire, the fighting between North and South resumed. Mr. Thieu clung to power, although he handed many of his duties to Mr. Khiem in 1974.

North Vietnam prepared for a final invasion of the South. It began in early 1975. By late March the numerically superior but demoralized forces of South Vietnam either were in retreat or had surrendered. The invaders overran most of the country and closed in on Saigon.

In a radio and television address on April 2, 1975, Mr. Khiem told the nation: "During the past two weeks, we have suffered heavy casualties only because we have lost self-control and failed to keep order. I affirm the government's determination to defend the remaining territory of South Vietnam and to eventually retake all territory lost to the Communists recently."

But two days later, Mr. Thieu announced that Mr. Khiem had been fired. Mr. Khiem vanished into a city giving way to panic and chaos as citizens scrambled to get out. Mr. Thieu himself resigned on April 21, leading to the final collapse nine days later, when the last American and Vietnamese officials were evacuated and North Vietnamese tanks rolled into the city.

It was unclear how Mr. Khiem escaped, but many government and military officials, diplomats, journalists and important civilians were airlifted from Saigon to American aircraft carriers in the South China Sea or flown to allied bases in Southeast Asia.

After a stop in Taiwan, Mr. Khiem arrived in the United States, one of the richest of its 200,000 Vietnamese refugees. The Chicago Tribune wrote in 1979, “Khiem, who will never have to work again, lives with his wife in a luxurious home in suburban Virginia, and they own a second home in southern France.”

He later moved from McLean, Va., to California. Former President Thieu settled in London, Boston and France. Former Vice President Ky operated a liquor store in Newark, Calif.



General Khiem, second from right on the dais, was South Vietnam's defense minister when he met with American officials in Saigon in March 1964. Standing with him from left were Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense Secretary Robert F. McNamara; and Henry Cabot Lodge, the United States ambassador to South Vietnam. Associated Press

Tran Thien Khiem was born on Dec. 15, 1925, in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). He was one of 12 children of Tran Thanh and Dich Vo, landowners in Long An, a province just south of the city. Although his parents were Buddhists, he graduated from a Roman Catholic high school in Saigon and later told an interviewer that he “had been drawn to Catholicism since childhood.”

He grew up in a nation colonized by the French in the 19th century and occupied by Japan during World War II. After that war, as the revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh sought Marxist independence for Vietnam and France tried to reassert its colonial authority, Mr. Khiem attended what would become the National Military Academy at Dalat.

In 1948, he became a first lieutenant in the Vietnamese Army that fought beside French forces against Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh in the first Indochina war. He was named a major in 1954 during the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French defeat that ended the war and led to the Geneva accords that cut Vietnam into a Communist north and a southern republic. In 1957 and 1958, as a colonel, Mr. Khiem studied at the Command and General Staff College in Leavenworth, Kan.

He married Yen Dinh in 1950, and they had a daughter. His first wife died in 2004, and in 2005 he married Ann Chastain, of Eureka, Calif. They were divorced in 2012. He is survived by his daughter, Yen Khanh, and an adopted son, Tran Khan, as well as a granddaughter.

The late 1950s and early '60s were a time of autocratic and nepotistic rule by South Vietnam's American-supported president, Ngo Dinh Diem, who in a largely Buddhist land favored Catholics in many walks of life. His refusal to allow elections in 1956 was a factor leading to the Vietnam War. In 1960, Colonel Khiem crushed a coup against Mr. Diem, his godfather, and was promoted to general.

But in 1963, in what the Kennedy administration and General Khiem had expected to be a nonviolent coup, other Vietnamese military plotters arranged to have President Diem deposed and shot dead in an armored personnel carrier en route to the airport and an anticipated exile abroad.

In the intrigue after the assassination, short-lived juntas were ended by coups. General Khiem was briefly part of a ruling junta before being sent into political exile as ambassador to the United States in 1964. From Washington, he conspired with Saigon generals to seize power. But on the day of a planned coup, he forgot to set his alarm clock and overslept. The coup went ahead without him and failed.

In 1965, another junta, which included General Thieu and General Ky, appointed Mr. Khiem ambassador to Taiwan. He was brought back to Saigon in 1968 and pledged loyalty to the newly elected President Thieu. A year later, he was named premier, and he held that powerful post until the regime's final days.

General Khiem lived in quiet retirement in San Jose, along with a number of other former high-ranking South Vietnamese officers. (He was finally baptized a Catholic there in 2018.)

The Vietnamese diaspora in the United States is highly factionalized, with former officers taking the hardest anti-Communist line. General Khiem avoided controversy by keeping a low profile and gave almost no interviews.

Seth Mydans contributed reporting.