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Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, 84, Seen as Hero in Vietnam, Dies

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, a popular and flamboyant South Vietnamese senior officer whose firing in the spring of 1966 set off civil warfare within his own country at the same time it was fighting the Communist north, died Saturday in Lancaster, Pa. He was 84.

Matthew Kalafat, his son-in-law, announced the death.

General Thi administered a huge swath of the northern part of South [Vietnam](#) when his chief rival in the ruling military junta, Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, the premier, persuaded eight generals in the 10-man junta to join him in ousting General Thi.

Buddhists, who made up a majority in South Vietnam, rose up in a rebellion that came to be called “the struggle movement.” Interpretations of the importance of the ouster of General Thi, a Buddhist, in starting the rioting and other civil disobedience vary.

American diplomats at first applauded his ouster and accused him of acting like a warlord. The New York Times reported that President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#)’s strong expression of support of Premier Ky at a meeting in Honolulu in February 1966 was a tacit license for the Vietnamese leader to act against General Thi.

By summer, government forces, with the aid of the United States military, had defeated the struggle movement. General Thi was dismissed from the army and sent to the United States for sinus treatment, which his son-in-law said he did not need. (The general said his only sinus problem was “the stink of corruption.”) It turned out to be a permanent exile.

Nguyen Chanh Thi was born on Feb. 23, 1923, in Hue, a city he would later administer. His father was a low-level government bureaucrat who had fought in the French army in World War I. He himself joined the French Army when he was 17, and fought nationalists seeking independence throughout Vietnam.

He stayed in the army of the independent South Vietnam as one of the new middle-class officers who were fast becoming influential. Most received training in the United States, spoke at least some English and easily developed working relationships with American advisors, and later, soldiers.

General Thi seemed to be continually involved in initiating coups or coup rumors or helping to stop them. In November 1960, as a colonel commanding the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade, he staged an abortive coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem. He fled to Cambodia for three years and lived off the land until it was safe to return after Mr. Diem was overthrown in November 1963.

The following January, he played a leading role in another coup, which brought Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh to power. He later helped General Khanh defeat a coup. In a headline in 1965, The Times called him “a coup

specialist.”

General Thi had plenty of conspiratorial company. In her book “Fire in the Lake” (1972), Frances FitzGerald wrote that Vietnamese generals “rushed about trading rumors as to whether General Thi would oust Ky or vice versa.”

Whether through a talent for intrigue, or simply talent, General Thi advanced rapidly. He came to command the I Corps area, which included two army divisions, and governed five populous northern provinces.

There were four such corps area in South Vietnam, and their commanders controlled the 10 divisions of the army. As the Saigon government lost its hold on the country in the mid-1960s, the corps commanders established, in effect, four separate governments.

In the civil service, they hired and dismissed. In public affairs, they led. Each used his own troops to make his word stick. In addition, each corps commander belonged to the governing council.

General Thi performed a balancing act, The Times suggested in a news analysis in March 1966. It said he was an officer on the governing directorate but strove to have dissidents think of him as a friend. He let students publish a magazine that was strongly critical of the government.

His popularity was clear when he returned to Hue in his administrative area five days after being removed from his command. About 20,000 people swarmed around him, shouting and trying to touch him.

“Do you want the general to stay with us?” a Buddhist student leader shouted. The students answered, “Yes! Yes!”

As a result, General Thi was sent to the United States. An officer who had liked to sport a red beret, he left his uniforms in his closet and threw away all his medals. His only souvenir from his military service was an army blanket.

In 1971, The Times reported, he lived in a shabby one-room apartment in Washington, a far cry from the French colonial villa he had left behind. He cooked his own food, and spent his days reading Asian history in the [Library of Congress](#).

Originally, he received the pay due a three-star general — \$600 a month. But in the early months of his exile, he was an outspoken critic of Mr. Ky, and his bluntness was costly. His pay was trimmed to \$170 a month. His four children lived in a Presbyterian home in Lynchburg, Va.

He is survived by those children, sons Loc, of Warren, N.J.; Minh, of Hawaii; Hien, of Flemington, N.J.; and Vinh, of Houston; all of whom use Nguyen as their last name; and a daughter, Yen Gates, of North Carolina. He is also survived by his second wife, Katherine Nguyen, and their daughter, Pauline Nguyen, of Scotch Plains, N.J.

During his years in the United States, General Thi was a custodian in a motel in Los Angeles and ran a cafe in Arkansas, among other things. But when he was recognized in a Vietnamese restaurant, a common occurrence, he was treated as a hero.

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