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®

**VIETNAM: PART III**

**UNCLE SAM**

**KNOWS BEST.....by JOAN KENNEDY TAYLOR**

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**50¢**

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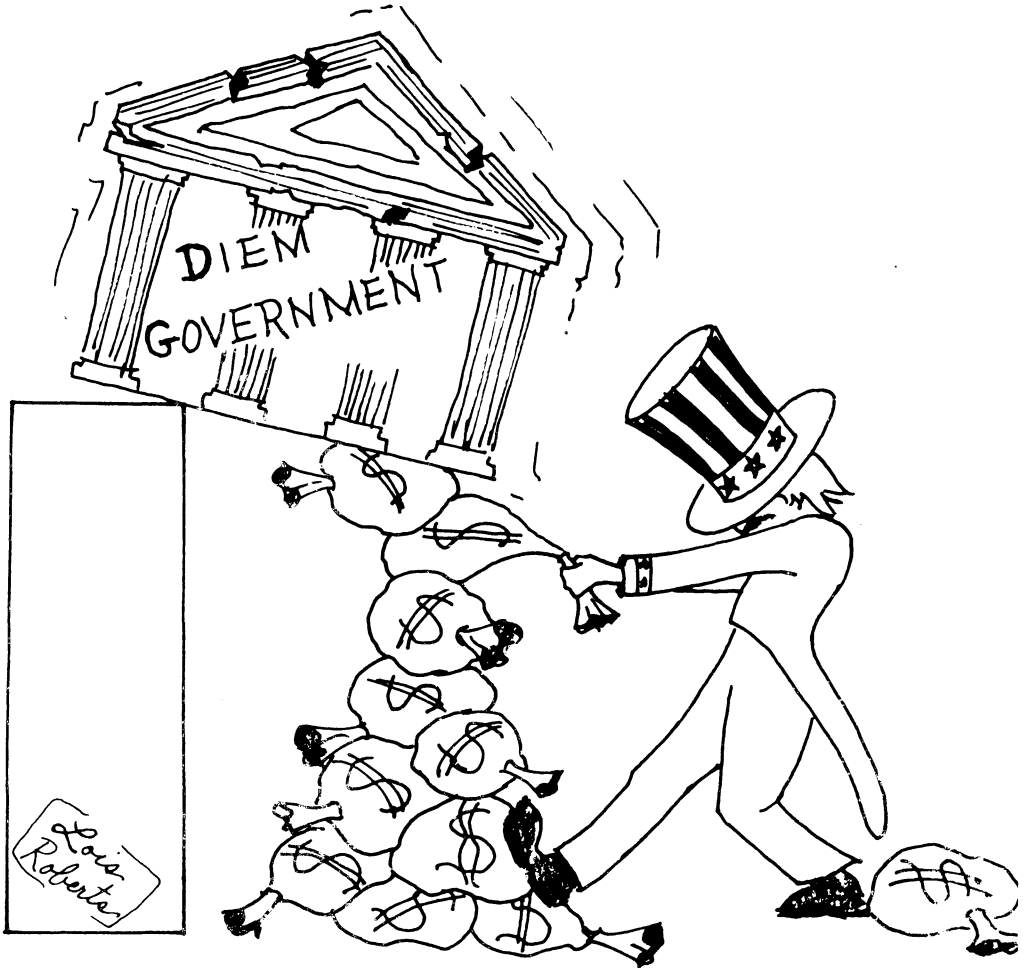
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**Vietnam: Part III**

**Uncle Sam Knows Best**

The overthrow (and subsequent murder) of President Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1, 1963, was a turning point for American involvement in Vietnam. In the entire nine years of Diem's regime, during all of which time he had been supported by American aid and American military advisors, less than 127 Americans had been killed in Vietnam. According to General Thomas A. Lane, Ret., "President Diem wanted Americans limited to purely advisory and training duties, with all the fighting to be done by South Viet Nameese forces. He was keenly aware that if the Communists succeeded in undermining his position as a national leader by persuading the people he was a puppet of the United States, they would win the war." (Lane, p. 69)

It was in 1964, after Diem's ouster, that American troops were first officially committed to combat in Vietnam. But in spite of the fact that we have sent increasing numbers of men and increasing amounts of aid, the government of South Vietnam has less control of the countryside now than it did in the fall of 1963. What can explain the gains of the Viet Cong, the loss of control of large areas of countryside, the frequent changes of government in Saigon?

If anyone was in a position to understand and to find out, it was the late Marguerite Higgins, who had been a front-line war correspondent in World War II and in Korea; who had been raised in the Orient and then based there professionally for 15 years before the Vietnam crisis; who had been Chief of the *New York Herald Tribune's* Berlin Bureau in 1947 and Chief of its Tokyo Bureau in 1950, and knew everybody and could therefore talk to them--Ambassadors, CIA men, State Department officials, Robert Kennedy, President Diem himself.

In *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, she gives her answer. It is that the nightmare in Vietnam was created in large part by American policy. "In the fall of 1963 Washington went into the business of hiring and firing governments. We not only forgot the one overriding priority, the war effort, but also, for the first time in history, conspired in the ouster of an ally in the middle of a common war against the Communist enemy, thus plunging the country and the war effort into a steep spiral of decline." (Higgins, p. 288)

Unfortunately, this is not a mere assertion from a partisan of a particular hypothesis. The newspapers of the period, as we shall see, contain ample evidence of the pressure that was being put on President Diem by the American press, by the public statements of American officials, and by actions of the American government.

In an earlier article I discussed the emergence of Ngo Dinh Diem at the end of the Indochinese War as the only non-Communist leader of stature in Vietnam. His refusal to work for the Japanese, the French, or the Communist Viet Minh as a political leader had given him a reputation as a stubborn nationalist, and when Vietnam was partitioned by the Geneva Accords of 1954, approximately one million refugees from the northern sector fled to what was then the State of Vietnam, where Bao Dai was Head of State and Diem, Premier. The resettlement of these refugees was not the only problem that the new government faced.

Three groups had their own private armies in the South Vietnam of 1954--one, the Binh Xuyen, was a gangster organization that controlled not only gambling and prostitution in Cholon, the Chinese city next to Saigon, but also controlled the police in the Saigon-Cholon area. Both Robert Shaplen and

Denis Warner cite the rumor that the leader of the Binh Xuyen paid 40 million piastres to Bao Dai for these concessions. The other two armed groups were religious sects, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. The three groups banded together against Diem. Diem shut down the gambling casinos, fought a pitched battle with the Binh Xuyen forces in the streets of Saigon, and, rather than accede to the demands of the two sects that he reorganize the government, dispersed their armies and their leaders and managed to assimilate much of their forces into the national army. During this period he was under criticism for taking a strong line rather than negotiating from the Americans, from the French, and from Emperor Bao Dai, who attempted to call him to the French Riviera "for consultation" when the fighting with the Binh Xuyen broke out.

It was after Diem's policy was victorious that he held the plebescite, on October 23, 1955, which established the Republic of Vietnam and himself as its first president. The Republic was proclaimed on October 26.

Both Diem's friends and his enemies say he was "authoritarian." What does this mean? Certainly, he moved in the direction of establishing a representative form of government in Vietnam where none had existed before. He proclaimed a republic, established a National Constituent Assembly which held its first election on March 4, 1956, published Vietnam's first constitution on October 26, 1956 (and changed the National Constituent Assembly into the National Assembly), held a second national election for the Assembly on August 30, 1959, won a presidential election on April 9, 1961, and held a final, postponed election for the National Assembly on September 27, 1963, despite the state of emergency caused by Viet Cong attacks.

On the other hand, despite this movement toward democratic forms, he obviously became more and more concerned about the possibility of subversion inherent in the democratic process, and he not only proclaimed a state of emergency on October 18, 1961, which was never lifted, thus enabling himself under the Constitution to rule virtually by fiat, but he became more and more restrictive about who was permitted to be a candidate for the National Assembly, until in the last election, many candidates were unopposed. Robert Shaplen tells us that "Diem made his greatest mistake, in the opinion of a number of his advisors, in abolishing elections for village chiefs and for municipal councils in June and August of 1956. Henceforth, the village heads were appointed by the province chiefs." (Shaplen, p. 133) This particular mistake was apparently rectified, for in August, 1963, Marguerite Higgins was reporting in the *New York Herald Tribune* that "Under President Diem's concept that democracy can best be learned at the rice paddy roots, hamlets are not declared a part of the national network--which would qualify them for a number of special health and educational benefits--until after elections have been held for the hamlet chief."

Political detention was practiced in Vietnam--Bernard B. Fall reported that "Diem's presidential ordinance No. 6 of January 11, 1956, provided for the indefinite detention in concentration camps of anyone found to be a 'danger to the state.'" (Raskin and Fall, p. 254) However, it is exceedingly difficult to find out how many people were held as political prisoners. Marguerite Higgins says that there were only 300 political prisoners at the time of Diem's death, and Robert Shaplen has the following to say: "by 1962 there were some thirty thousand prisoners in about fifty jails throughout the country, about two-thirds of whom were classified as political prisoners. Many were captured Vietcong insurgents, but there were

also a lot of 'suspects' who had languished in jails for months or even years. Among the prisoners were some three hundred non-Communist liberals arrested solely for having expressed anti-Diem views or for being suspected of having spoken out in favor of the abortive 1960 coup." (Shaplen, p. 157, italics mine) In other words, ten thousand of those in jail were ordinary criminals, and "many" of those classified as political prisoners were prisoners-of-war. Is it a coincidence that the one specific figure he gives is 300, just as Miss Higgins did? There is no way of knowing. But at any rate, it is a long way from the kind of rumor exemplified in 1967 on a CBS Town Meeting of the World, when a young foreign student claimed to Governor Ronald Reagan of California that Diem had imprisoned six million people! An ironic coda to the question of political prisoners came when, a few days after the coup, the military junta with much fanfare released political prisoners from Poulo Condore, an island penal colony 50 miles offshore from Saigon. How many prisoners? Thirty-three.

Diem was certainly not bloodthirsty. In April, 1963, he proclaimed an amnesty program toward the Viet Cong, and, again according to Marguerite Higgins, "over 10,000 came in under that program in 1963."

The picture of Diem that emerges as one reads both admiring and hostile accounts is of a man of honesty, integrity, and diligence, who wanted to do the best for his people but was not convinced of the importance of civil liberties in a country at war. Unproved charges of corruption were leveled against members of his family, but never against him. He did bring order to a country that was in great disorder; he did restore some sort of administration; he did root out the most obvious corruption; and he



did establish some sort of morale in the countryside--with the strategic hamlet program and by arming the Self-Defense Corps (the village militia) with the antiquated French weapons which were abandoned when the last French forces left in 1956. (The Americans were not at that time willing to provide new weapons for such a purpose.) He also began a land reform program which had some popularity, in which he used American aid to buy land from large estate holders and give it to landless peasants. His worst fault seems to have been his insistence on doing everything himself, which often slowed the processes of government considerably. It is said that as he felt more beleaguered, toward the end of his regime, he insisted on deciding personally on every exit visa, and on the placing of every new tree in the park.

Why was he beleaguered? American pressure was on him from the beginning. The first official communication he received from this country was a letter from President Eisenhower on October 23, 1954, informing him that American aid would be given directly to the State of Vietnam, and not through France, as formerly. In it Eisenhower said, "The Government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the Government of Viet-Nam in undertaking needed reforms." (quoted in Raskin and Fall, p. 100) One might think that the unspecified "needed reforms" obviously referred to the shocking control of the police force by a group of racketeers, but when Diem refused the demand of the leaders of the Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao that he form a government of national union in which they were represented, Eisenhower's personal representative in Saigon, General J. Lawton Collins, instead of backing Diem, returned to Washington to insist that Diem must go. Robert Shaplen quotes Kenneth Young, then head of the Southeast Asia section of the State Department, as saying that a cable to the Saigon

Embassy containing a decision to put someone else in power in Vietnam had actually been sent, and was only countermanded when Diem showed he was obviously holding his own against the Binh Xuyen gangsters.

There were constant disagreements on military policy. A large-army approach had been established by the French, who had implemented it in a way calculated to antagonize most of the people. "Many of the recruits were taken by press-gang methods. Troops would block off a street in a town or village and capture all eligible-looking young men of military age in nets and cart them off like wild animals to recruiting depots. In Tongking alone desertions averaged about 300 a day for some months before the end. It passed the 600 mark after Dien Bien Phu." (Warner, p. 128)

For a time after the end of the war the Americans and the French shared the military training program. "A Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM) was established, headed by General John (Iron Mike) O'Daniel, who was also the head of the Military Assistance and Advisory Mission that had been helping the French during the Indochina war and was still in existence. O'Daniel had a French chief of staff and an American deputy chief of staff, and each of the four divisions--Army, Navy, Air Force, and National Security--had alternate American chiefs and French deputies." (Shaplen, p. 119)

In 1956 the last of the French withdrew, and the Americans took over sole responsibility for training. They continued to build a conventional Western army, ready to counter invasion from the North. Denis Warner says that senior Vietnamese officials were convinced from the beginning that what was needed was a grass-roots local militia, and Diem was following their advice when he created the Self-Defense Corps at the end of 1955. From that time until 1960,

Diem pressed the need for effective counterinsurgency measures on any American official who would listen, but "Among military men there were built-in prejudices against accepting the principle that conventionally trained, well-equipped Western-type armies could not cope with often extremely badly equipped Asian irregulars." (Warner, p. 131) The Americans created the kind of army they wanted, because they were paying for it. It was not until 1961 that American policy reversed itself, counterinsurgency became the official American policy, and the Self-Defense Corps (village-based militia) and Civil Guard (paramilitary police) began getting the training and equipment they most needed. In the meantime, the brunt of the Viet Cong's early attacks had fallen upon them.

"The inevitable effect of creating such a large army," writes Sir Robert Thompson, "was that political power in the country rested entirely with control of the army. President Diem was forced to devote much of his time and energy to manipulating the army commands in order to retain controls and maintain his position. All efforts to encourage him to broaden the base of his government and attract more popular support were meaningless in a situation in which the reality of political power lay not with the people but with the army." (Thompson, p. 58-59) Diem himself, in an interview published in *U.S. News & World Report* on February 18, 1963, sadly and prophetically stated that "the governments which have tried to establish Western-style democracy from the top down in an underdeveloped country have all been liquidated by military coups d'etats."

In the summer of 1963, in spite of the guerrilla terrorist attacks, there was much reason for optimism in Vietnam. A provincial administration had been established, the strategic hamlet program was thriving, and, although there were still strategic disagree-

ments between Americans and Vietnamese, the principle of anti-insurgency had been accepted. American and British officials and observers were cautiously predicting that victory could come in three years. Then, on May 8, 1963, a protest over an order not to fly religious flags higher than the national flag at the celebration of Buddha's birth in Hue, snowballed into the storming of a radio station, an attempt by troops to control the crowd, and the death of a few people (some say eight, some say nine) in the crowd. The Buddhist demonstrators claimed that troops fired at them--the government claimed that someone threw a Viet Cong plastic bomb. Marguerite Higgins discusses this incident in depth, basing her discussion on her interviews with eyewitnesses, the account of the United Nations investigation in the fall of 1963, "and the allegations and testimony of witnesses as contained in the indictment of Major Dang Sy, the Catholic assistant province chief at Hue, who was accused of being responsible for the incident." (Higgins, p. 90) (This trial took place after Diem's downfall, under a Buddhist government.) According to Miss Higgins, the chief instigator of the incident was a Buddhist monk named Thich Tri Quang, who had interspersed harsh criticisms of the government into the official tape of the religious proceedings, and then led a riot at the radio station attempting to force the rebroadcast of this antigovernment propaganda. President Diem ordered an army investigation of the incident which concluded that the deaths had been caused by plastic bombs.

Again, American pressure was brought to bear on Diem. He was to apologize, rectify Buddhist grievances, and allow demonstrations of protest. Miss Higgins quotes an American official as saying "direct, relentless, tablehammering pressure on Diem such as the United States had seldom before attempted with a sovereign friendly government" was applied by the American charge d'affaires. (Higgins, p. 100)

And to pressure from the American government was added pressure from the American press. On June 11, an elderly Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, was burned to death in public, ostensibly to protest the persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam. Here is the scene as Miss Higgins describes it:

"The suicide took place in front of the Cambodian embassy. In the heat of the day, an Austin car drove up, out of which emerged Thich Quang Duc, who seemed to totter slightly and was supported by two fellow monks. Eyewitnesses have said that the aged monk seemed drugged. His appearance coincided with the arrival at the Cambodian embassy of a procession of monks who formed a circle around him. The seventy-eight-year-old Thich Quang Duc then seated himself in the lotus position and gasoline was poured over him. He tried to set himself afire with a small pocket lighter he carried. It failed to work. And so a monk in the circle stepped forward and turned him into a pyre at the stroke of a match. Western photographers were on hand to record the scene." (Higgins, p. 18)

And almost to a man, the American press corps concluded that if anyone was willing to make such a horrible protest, the conditions being protested must be infinitely more horrible. It was as simple as that. Several successive burnings of a similar nature took place, and each one raised an American outcry. No one, at the time or since, has ever brought out any evidence that there was any religious persecution in Vietnam at all. The regulation of flag-flying was not directed solely against Buddhists--it applied to Catholics, too. Approximately 1,275 new pagodas had been built during the Diem regime, and the government had contributed "nine million Vietnamese piastres to various Buddhist organizations to help in construction and reconstruction of pagodas." (Higgins, p. 45) This,

even though the Buddhists were by no means the majority of the population--at most there were 3.5 million of them or 30 per cent of the population. And the Buddhist protesters led by Thich Tri Quang were a small Buddhist minority. In his last interview with Marguerite Higgins, President Diem said: "I have done everything within my power to placate these Buddhists. I have made an agreement with them concerning the flying of flags and property ownership. I have offered to have every single grievance investigated by an international commission, including the foreign press and the Buddhists themselves. Why won't they accept these offers? It is because they want, not a solution, but an excuse to continue agitation against this government. There are Communist Viet Cong in those pagodas, Miss Higgins, and we know it." (Higgins, p. 172)

But how could people be induced to burn themselves alive? Many young Buddhists believed that Buddhists in other cities were suffering atrocities, because the General Buddhist Association said it was so. When a report on Vietnam was issued on December 7, 1963, by the United Nations team which was investigating the charges of religious persecution at Diem's invitation, it included a long interview with a nineteen-year-old monk whose attempted suicide had been prevented by the police. He had been told of atrocities: "I heard for example that Buddhist monks and nuns were beaten, that their hands were broken, that they were drowned, and that they had their stomachs ripped open." He was taken to meet two men, who told him they needed ten volunteers for suicide, and asked him to be one. "I accepted because I felt so upset about the news I had heard earlier about the government's treatment of monks. ...I was told not to worry, that the suicide-promotion group would make all the arrangements. I asked what kind of arrangements, and they answered

on the twenty-sixth of October I would be given a white suit and a yellow robe soaked with gasoline. They would provide me with a car bearing a sticker enabling the car to go into the area. When the car got there, I was to get out in a normal manner. The car would be driven away. I was then to sit down, put on the yellow robe, and strike a match and set myself on fire." (quoted in Higgins, p. 79-80) They even had three pre-written suicide notes for him, which he had signed. Another foiled suicide came to the attention of Ivan Matteo Lombardo, former Italian Minister of Production, who described it in *Il Borghese* magazine. In this case, the young monk was from a remote province, and had been told that all the pagodas in Saigon had been burned. He deviated from the specific route he had been given to get to his appointed place of sacrifice, and so passed near a pagoda, which was not only intact but open for business. As he stared in amazement, a policeman noticed him and questioned him, and the proposed suicide came to light. He too had been given pills to kill the pain, but when tested they were found to be totally ineffective.

Thich Tri Quang, who emerged more and more clearly as the spokesman for the General Buddhist Association and its demands, worked with the Viet Minh against the French. Although he claims to have fallen out with the Communists since that time, his brother as of 1965 was "working for Ho Chi Minh in the Communist Vietnam's Ministry of the Interior, The duties of Thich Tri Quang's brother include the direction of subversion in South Vietnam." (Higgins, p. 29)

How was the conflict between the government and the General Buddhist Association reported in America? Ted Morello, in the *New York World Telegram and Sun* of July 10, 1963, referred to Diem's "personal

religious vendetta against his overwhelmingly Buddhist people," and later in the same article said, "And if he ever had popular support, he has lost it through his stepped-up inquisition against the Buddhists, a gentle people comprising over 70 percent of the Vietnams." *Newsweek* on July 15 mentioned "the Diem government's attempt to restrict the religious freedom of the nation's 10 million Buddhists who make up about 70 percent of the population," and stated, "A month earlier, Diem's troops had fired into a Buddhist procession celebrating the 2,507th birthday of the Buddha in Hue in Central Vietnam, killing eleven people including women and children." *Time* on July 19 said, "Buddhist Monk Thich Quang Duc burned himself to death on a Saigon street corner in protest against restrictions imposed on the country's 12 million Buddhists by Diem's predominantly Roman Catholic regime." Tad Szulc of *The New York Times* referred to "brutal excesses against the Buddhists" on September 1, and called the regime "a tough and unpopular dictatorship."

Marguerite Higgins described how the Xa Loi pagoda in Saigon became in effect a public relations office, printing its street banners in English so that the Americans could read them, mimeographing press releases, using loudspeakers to be heard clearly, holding press conferences, and telephoning reporters to announce when and where the next suicide would take place. Thich Tri Quang openly boasted that he would make a lot of trouble when the new American ambassador arrived. Buddhist demonstrations of "protest" were held in the streets and student demonstrations had begun to occur. Martial law was declared, and on August 21, the Xa Loi and perhaps a dozen other pagodas were raided by the Saigon government. "At least one monk was killed and 30 monks and nuns were wounded ...at the Xa Loi pagoda," wrote Joseph Fried, Staff



Correspondent of the *New York News*. "Reuters reported that reliable sources said at least 30 persons were killed," said the Associated Press on August 23. And an Associated Press dispatch printed in the *New York World Telegram and Sun* on August 28 said, "thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns were beaten, shot or arrested." But September 2, *Newsweek* was saying, "All told, some 2,000 pagodas were raided, and at least 30 Buddhists were said to have lost their lives." "When the United Nations mission to Vietnam investigated the rumors and charges three months later, it could find no evidence that anyone had been killed!" said Marguerite Higgins two years later. (Higgins, p. 180)

The day after the raids, Henry Cabot Lodge arrived in Saigon to take up his new post as ambassador. A month later, it was to come to light that on August 24, a cable had been sent from the State Department to the scarcely oriented Lodge. According to the *New York Herald Tribune* of September 24, 1963, "The cable was prepared by Roger Hilsman. He's Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. Mr. Hilsman, Pentagon sources contended, showed the message to W. Averell Harriman, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. Mr. Harriman was said to have approved the cable. Out it went. There was no prior consultation with Mr. McNamara." To which *The New York Times* on October 3 added, "At the time, almost every key administration official was out of town, including President Kennedy, Mr. McNamara, Mr. Rusk and Central Intelligence Agency head John McCone... The burden of the telegram was that President Ngo Dinh Diem should make drastic changes, including the diminution of the powers of the Ngo Dinh Nhu, his brother and sister-in-law. If Mr. Diem resisted these changes, then the Vietnamese military should be put on notice that Washington would not oppose a military effort to assert its will in various degrees." Mr. Lodge

asked the CIA to ask the leading generals if they were ready to take action; and, as the *Times* put it: "What the CIA check learned was that the Vietnamese military officers, for all their anti-Diem talk, were not ready for revolt."

On August 26, at about the time that the CIA was "checking," *The Voice of America* broadcast to Saigon a State Department announcement that the United States government completely absolved the Vietnamese army from taking part in the pagoda raids, although the generals had asked for martial law, and stated that the raids had been conducted by the police and small groups of Special Forces, under the command of President Diem's brother, Mr. Nhu. At 12:30 a.m., Monday, August 26, another *Voice of America* broadcast to Saigon in Vietnamese said, "the United States may sharply reduce aid if Diem does not fire the secret police responsible for brutal attacks against the pagodas." (quoted in the *New York Herald Tribune* of August 27, 1963)

Twelve hours later, the State Department rebuked *The Voice of America*, which had been quoting a speculative UPI dispatch written in Washington, and stated officially that a decision on aid had not been made. It was not until October 7 that the news broke that, soon after the pagoda raids, the United States did indeed suspend, not any military aid, but the commercial import program worth about \$10,000,000 a month. According to David Halberstram, in a *New York Times* dispatch dated October 7, "Reliable sources" said that "no commercial aid dollars had been released since the raids on Buddhist pagodas on August 21." The article predicted eventual "sharp economic and political effects" for the move, and ran under a sub-headline which read: "Washington Feels Vietnam May be Easier to Guide If Funds Run Out."

On September 1, three Buddhist monks, among them Thich Tri Quang, were granted political asylum in the U. S. Embassy in Saigon.

On September 2, 1963, President Kennedy was interviewed by CBS newsman Walter Cronkite, on nationwide television. He had comments to make on Civil Rights, the Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, and other issues, but it was his views on Vietnam that made the headlines. As quoted in the *New York Herald Tribune*, he claimed that "in the last two months the government has gotten out of touch with the people. The repressions against the Buddhists, we felt, were very unwise." He also said that he feared the war would be lost "unless a greater effort is made by the government to win popular support" and that all we can do "is to make it very clear we don't think this is the way to win." James Reston commented on this method of diplomacy as "at least original," but pointed out to readers of *The New York Times* on September 3 that President Kennedy had not only attacked the prestige of the Saigon government, but by closing with a statement that the United States would not withdraw, he created a situation in which "if Diem changes his policies and his government, it will be said that he did so under public pressure from the United States: and if he doesn't change, the President will be charged with backing what he himself has called a losing policy."

On the same day that President Kennedy was asking for "changes in policy and perhaps in personnel," the *Times of Vietnam*, a newspaper that received heavy backing from the Saigon government, charged that the CIA had been planning a coup d'etat for August 28, but that the Saigon government had discovered it. Although we now know that the CIA had been questioning the generals about their willingness to overthrow the government in this same period,

the *New York Herald Tribune* tells us "The U.S. Embassy called the report 'nonsense.'"

Openly referring to "The inability of the United States to induce Vietnamese military chiefs to take control," a *New York Times* story by Tad Szulc of September 8 told its readers (both here and abroad) that "Saigon's defiance of the United States has led to the decision for progressive aid cuts if the Government does not profoundly reform....Officials noted that in yesterday's student demonstrations anti-United States slogans were shouted for the first time." After 800 high school demonstrators were arrested, an American official purportedly said to Mr. Szulc, "We cannot go on supporting a dictatorial regime...that is different from Communism only in name and in its international connections."

On October 21, David Halberstram in *The New York Times* wrote that the CIA had been paying the salaries of the Special Forces, but that the United States had decided that this would no longer be done unless "they were used in combat against Communist guerrillas and only if they notified American advisors of their movements." A UPI dispatch on October 22 put it this way: the Special Forces "will receive no pay or supplies from the United States as long as they remain around Saigon as security troops for the regime."

On November 1, a coup d'etat unseated President Ngo Dinh Diem, and he and his brother were murdered. A story by Max Frankel from Washington in *The New York Times* of November 2, 1963, begins: "For a few hours, the men of power around this capital were making limp jokes about it, about their power and about the evidence of that power pouring in from South Vietnam. 'Well, you finally got them,' they would say, slapping the backs of others to whom President Ngo Dinh Diem and his domineering brother,

Ngo Dinh Nhu, have long been anathema." The Diem government was replaced by a military junta.

Marguerite Higgins tells us that she telephoned Assistant Secretary Roger Hilsman at 2 a.m. on November 2. (She was calling at the request of Madam Nhu, who wanted to locate her children.) Miss Higgins writes: "'Congratulations, Roger,' I said. 'How does it feel to have blood on your hands?' 'Oh, come on now, Maggie,' said Roger. 'Revolutions are rough. People get hurt.'" (Higgins, p. 225)

The implication of this statement is that this particular revolution brought some benefit to the people. Well, it brought back American aid. A *Christian Science Monitor* front page headline on November 4, 1963, read "Hope Dawns in Saigon." On November 7, Washington recognized the new government and promised to hold talks on renewing the aid programs as soon as possible. A *New York Times* story from Washington by Henrick Smith, dated November 7, says: "Officials have also pointed out that although the Saigon coup deposed a Government technically chosen through elections, the new regime is expected to be more democratic than the old one."

*Time* described the first days of the new government on November 8. "The first acts of Minh & Co. were to declare martial law, with an 8 p.m. curfew and censorship of press messages abroad....Minh's junta also suspended the constitution, dissolved the National Assembly...they were aware of the fact--which Diem also knew--that total freedom in time of war is impossible. So the junta added somewhat nervously that it had no intention of establishing a 'disorderly democratic regime.'" On November 10, Sanche de Gramont reported in the *New York Herald Tribune*, "The 12 generals who seized the government from the discredited Ngo dynasty have told United

States authorities they plan to keep emergency powers for from six months to two years. They have no other program than to wage war against the Communist Viet Cong."

Within a few days the ban on dancing which had been introduced into the National Assembly by Mme. Nhu was lifted, and *Time* ran an AP newsphoto showing grinning American soldiers dancing with Vietnamese girls, purportedly to indicate that "Saigon looked like a city liberated."

Between November 30 and December 7 there were four suicides by fire.

But these were now treated very differently from the ones that had occurred when the Diem government was in power. They were not shrieked about in the press as proving the existence of intolerable persecution. *The New York Times* of December 1 merely stated about the first suicide, a seventeen-year-old girl, "The police said that the girl...burned herself as a sign of gratitude for the release of Buddhist priests and nuns jailed by the Diem regime." A small Associated Press dispatch on December 3 reported the unexplained suicides by burning of two men, and a 17-line AP filler appeared December 7 on "the fourth victim of self-immolation within a week....The men took their lives because of illness."

The junta had all of the problems that had faced President Diem, plus some new ones. The war with the Viet Cong accelerated immeasurably. The Buddhist leaders continued to incite riots and attempt to topple governments. There was no longer even the semblance of constitutional government, and, due to a completely ill-advised decision to weed out as many bureaucrats who had served Diem as possible, administration quickly became a shambles.

Former officials were tried and executed. Freedom of the press was installed briefly, but as it resulted in a spate of criticisms and suggestions from Saigon's intellectuals, before the end of 1963 there was not only censorship, but three Saigon newspapers were suspended from publication indefinitely by government order. The only thing they had gained was American friendship.

Consider the implications of the fact that the economic squeeze which we had applied had resulted in inflation, food hoarding, the cutting of civil service salaries, and a heavy impact on Saigon's businessmen. And then consider the following two conversations, reported by Marguerite Higgins. "In a conversation with an American months after the *coup d'etat*, General Big Minh, one-time head of the military junta, who, in his turn, was exiled, stated frankly: 'We had no alternative. They had to be killed.'

"'Diem could not be allowed to live,' General Minh said, 'because he was too much respected among simple gullible people in the countryside, especially the Catholics and the refugees. We had to kill Nhu because he was so widely feared--and he had created organizations that were arms of his personal power.'

"Prime Minister Tran Van Huong (in office October, 1964-January, 1965) had another view. In a discussion with a British diplomat, Prime Minister Huong said: 'The top generals who decided to murder President Diem and his brother were scared to death. The generals knew very well that having not talent, no moral virtues, and no popular support whatsoever, they could not prevent a spectacular comeback of the President and Mr. Nhu if they were alive.' It is an interesting comment coming from a man who passed a number of months in prison

because of political opposition to Diem." (Higgins, p. 215)

The policy we had toward training the Vietnamese army, and the policy we had toward the Diem government both show the same fatal flaw. Apart from the fact that we were uninformed about guerrilla warfare, apart from the fact that we were unacquainted with Vietnamese history, tradition and religions, apart from all the factors within the American government and out of it that made the specific steps we urged generally disastrous--the American government felt that it was unilaterally responsible for all major decisions in Vietnam. We decided how the army should be trained--and then when it suited us, we changed our mind, five years too late. There was not even an official joint council to confer on military and far-reaching political decisions, such as the strategic hamlet program.

All governments must offer their citizens one essential service--protection. In his book on counter-insurgency, Sir Robert Thompson points out that in a guerrilla area which has not been secured, extremely tough laws, curfews, requirements for identity cards, etc., may have to be in effect. "There are many who will criticize the harshness of the measures which may have to be used," he wrote. "This is a mistaken attitude. What the peasant wants to know is: Does the government mean to win the war? Because if not, he will have to support the insurgent. ...People will stand very harsh measures indeed, provided that they are strictly enforced and fairly applied to all, are effective in achieving their purpose and are seen to be so. The blame for the harshness of the measures can be placed squarely on the insurgent, and it should be made absolutely clear that as soon as the area is 'white,' restrictions can gradually be withdrawn!" (Thompson, p. 146) It is Sir Robert's contention that Diem was not willing to be authoritarian enough, was not willing



to secure his bases first and gradually extend the area under strict control out into the countryside, only relaxing the restrictions when he was sure that an area was both securely held and clear of insurgents. Such a policy would certainly have protected the people more firmly than the policy which required government and later American soldiers to bomb and strafe villages that were not secure.

But even if Diem had been willing to regulate civilian movements in the fashion suggested by Sir Robert, can one imagine the Americans allowing it? The Americans who put pressure on him not to break up antigovernment street demonstrations in the middle of a war, in spite of the fact that Viet Cong terrorists had been known to throw plastic bombs in Saigon before, and might plausibly be suspected of wishing to again, under cover of a demonstration?

Abraham Lincoln suspended habeas corpus during the Civil War. Franklin Delano Roosevelt interned all Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast for the duration of World War II. Another equally admired President, John F. Kennedy, prodded the citizenry of a wartime ally (whose restrictions of rights had not been as severe as Lincoln's and Roosevelt's) until a small group of military men deposed and murdered their president.

The result was chaos, a deterioration of the war, a series of constantly shifting governments in Saigon, the growth of American military forces in Vietnam from 14,000 to over half a million, and a situation in which, over much of the countryside, the choice of the citizens is now anarchy under the existing government or enslavement under the Communists.

When the American forces were entering Hue after the Viet Cong attack on the cities in February, 1968, a small item at the bottom of a page in *The*

*New York Times* reported the finding of a machine gun with three dead North Vietnamese soldiers chained to it. It was a machine gun which only took one man to fire, and apparently the three men had been chained to it while their unit retreated before the American advance, so that as the first man was killed, the others would continue to operate the gun.

On March 3, 1968, *The New York Times* reported that citizens in ten areas of Saigon have organized self-defense groups to defend themselves against the Viet Cong. They have armed themselves with such weapons as hammers, axes, bicycle chains, and kitchen knives, have surrounded their communities with barbed wire, and are taking turns patrolling. One fifty-four-year-old clerk was quoted as saying, "We are fighting for ourselves with what we have. And we know who the enemy is. The Government cannot protect us so we must protect ourselves."

These are the choices left. And it is our fault.

--Joan Kennedy Taylor

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