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CIA AND THE HOUSE OF NGO

*Covert Action in
South Vietnam, 1954-63 (U)*

Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.



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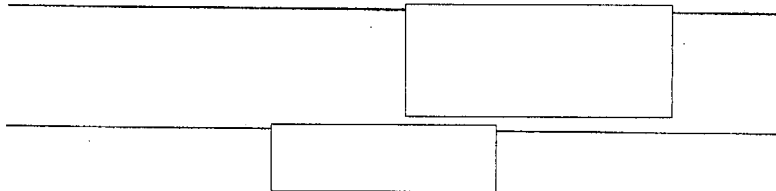
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Dedication

*To the Memory of Gordon Jorgensen,
Friend, Mentor, Patriot, and Transcendently Honest Man*

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Without Ken McDonald's willingness to take a chance on a beginner, I would not have been privileged to undertake this project. Without his gently guided on-the-job tour of historiographical technique, the product would not have whatever merit may be found in it. It is extraordinarily gratifying to have the assistance of an editor whose assiduous attention to both form and content is always aimed at helping the author write, not the editor's book, but his own. All errors are still mine alone.

All my other History Staff colleagues were also generous with their time, and I am grateful for their corrections and suggestions. I owe former Editorial Assistant Diane Marvin particular thanks for having volunteered to retype the entire draft when it proved impossible to convert the original version to a new software format, an effort truly above and beyond the call.

Finally, there is the debt to my interview subjects, some of whom, like Paul Harwood, Joe Redick, and Lou Conein, underwent repeated interrogation with unfailing equanimity and interest in helping me fill in the blanks. To all of them, my enduring gratitude.

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~~SECRET//X1~~*Foreword*

After the partition of Vietnam with the Geneva Agreements of 1954, the Eisenhower administration began to directly support the government in the South headed by Ngo Dinh Diem. President Eisenhower, in a letter to Diem, promised to help Diem maintain a "strong, viable state capable of resisting outside aggression." Armed with this support, in July 1954, Diem rejected the reunification elections provided for in the Geneva Agreements and declared South Vietnam a republic with himself as president. The CIA, although pessimistic about establishing a stable, civilian regime in South Vietnam, nevertheless set about assisting Diem in creating a new state. This is the story of CIA's efforts and its relationship with Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu.

Based on a thorough examination of CIA's records and on in-depth interviews of key participants, Thomas Ahern presents an authoritative review and assessment of CIA's evolving relationship with Diem, first as he struggled to consolidate his power and then as his increasingly authoritative regime faltered and collapsed when the South Vietnamese military seized power in a coup favored by the United States. The military generals assassinated Diem and his brother Nhu.

This ultimately tragic drama is followed in detail by Ahern as he traces CIA efforts to bring stability and democracy to South Vietnam and to influence Diem. Although not uncritical of US policy and CIA operations, Ahern's study reveals a CIA Station—indeed in the early years, two Stations—working diligently and effectively to aid Diem in forming a viable state. That this effort to build a modern nation state failed greatly frustrated CIA officers. Nevertheless, the CIA continued its efforts to influence and shape policies and programs in South Vietnam long after Diem's death.

This thoughtful study is the first volume in Thomas Ahern's larger work of CIA's role in South Vietnam from 1954 to 1975. The second volume, *CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam* was published in 1999, and the third volume, *The CIA and Rural Pacification in*

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South Vietnam, will also be forthcoming in the year 2000. Together these volumes provide a comprehensive review of CIA programs and reporting from Vietnam.

Gerald K. Haines
Chief Historian
CIA History Staff
Center for the Study of Intelligence
June 2000

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North and South Vietnam, 1954-1963



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~~SECRET//X1~~**CHAPTER 1***Anticolonialism versus Anticommunism*

The Viet Minh destroyed colonial rule in Indochina when they defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954.¹ Negotiations beginning in Geneva a day later led in July to an agreement signed by France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, Communist China, and the three Associated States of Indochina, including Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The United States agreed to respect the Geneva Accords, but, unhappy with the provision for the temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, refused to sign. Bao Dai, the puppet emperor of the French, remained in Cannes, and his new prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem, had played no role in the war or in the negotiations that ended it.²

As the Cold War deepened, and especially after the outbreak of the Korean war in June 1950, the United States had given the French massive material support in their war against the Viet Minh. Now, with the Geneva Accords going into effect, Washington faced the painful choice of either accepting the extension of Ho Chi Minh's authority throughout Vietnam or picking up the French burden of resistance to the Viet Minh. The decision, hesitant and incremental, was to back Diem and to try to create an independent, anti-Communist nation south of the 17th parallel.

¹ The term "Viet Minh" is an abbreviation for Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh—the Vietnam Independence League—the national front created by Ho Chi Minh in 1941 to resist the Japanese occupation and the Vichy French colonial regime that collaborated with it. South Vietnam as a separate, provisional entity came into existence as a result of the Geneva Accords. The other two Associated States, which together with Vietnam made up French Indochina, were Cambodia and Laos. Under the terms of the ceasefire, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was to take control of all Vietnamese territory north of the 17th parallel, while the French Expeditionary Corps retired to the south.

² This introduction relies on Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984); George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1987); and George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).

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There was good reason for American leaders to hesitate, beginning with the absence of any effective opposition to the Viet Minh. There were few illusions in Washington, either about Diem's political stature or about the cohesion or determination of the anti-Communist elements in the South. On the military side, the humiliation of the French confirmed the perils of a land war on the Asian mainland for a Western power, perils only recently emphasized by the stalemate in Korea. From the outset in 1954, some US policymakers warned that material support to Diem might lead to an inconclusive or even disastrous commitment of American ground forces.

If there were reasons to hesitate, there were also powerful incentives for the United States to deny the legitimacy of the Communist regime in the North and resist its anticipated drive to absorb the South. An apocalyptic but widely accepted version of the domino theory held that the loss of Indochina would invite Communist advances along the entire line from Japan to the Suez Canal.³ Domestic political considerations also intensified the pressure to act. The "who lost China?" debate and its exploitation by Senator Joseph McCarthy inhibited consideration of the possibility that the job could not be done, or at least not at an acceptable cost. The famous Army-McCarthy hearings were going on as the battle of Dien Bien Phu came to a close.

Administration acceptance of the Geneva Accords would risk political embarrassment as well as acquiescence in the probable Communization of Vietnam. At the instigation of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the US had committed \$400 million to the French in late 1953 to persuade them to stay the course in Indochina. To abandon the anti-Communist South only six months later would call into question the wisdom of that investment. In the end, the importance of halting the spread of Communism overshadowed the risks, and the United States embarked on its 21-year effort to create in South Vietnam a permanent barrier to Communist expansion in Southeast Asia.

The Origin of US Engagement

The US decision to replace the French as the guarantor of a non-Communist Vietnam represented the end of a tortuous path that first ran in the opposite direction. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's generic hostility to European colonialism and specific antipathy for Charles de Gaulle led him, during early planning for the postwar period, to suggest a United Nations trusteeship for Indochina. He later retreated from this, partly to avoid further demoralizing an already prostrate France, and partly to avoid weakening the basis for retaining

³ In fact, Indochina was the focus of the first use of the domino image, at a press conference held by President Eisenhower on 7 April 1954.

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the Pacific islands that the US had taken from Japan. But Roosevelt never yielded on his insistence that the French accept the principle of eventual independence for Indochina.

Although President Harry S Truman was not so personally hostile to French aims in Indochina as Roosevelt had been, opposition to the restoration of the colonial regime also fed on the perception of the State Department's Southeast Asian experts that the French would inevitably come to grief on the rocks of Vietnamese nationalism. But the force of this argument was blunted by the fact that, if Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist, he was also a Communist. His history of connections with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) acquired increasing importance as imminent victory over the Germans and the Japanese began to reveal the fault lines in the wartime alliance with the Soviets.

The immediate postwar period saw the consolidation of the Soviet hold over Eastern Europe. George Kennan's containment theory of 1946 became the conceptual basis of the US response to this challenge, as the Truman Doctrine of 1947 became its policy basis. Discomfort with the exploitative practices of French colonialism persisted, even while Washington thought it imperative to prop up a succession of French governments, partly by tacitly endorsing their aims in Indochina. The result was a schizophrenic policy that prohibited direct US support of French military operations in Indochina, then looked the other way while the French diverted to that purpose substantial quantities of US military and financial aid intended to defend France against the Soviet threat in Europe. In any case, the gradual intensification of the Cold War eroded earlier American impressions of Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist leader who might be encouraged or manipulated into becoming an "Asian Tito."

The final Communist victory in China in 1949 and Pyongyang's invasion of South Korea in 1950 reinforced the American view of Communism as an implacably expansionist monolith. Indochina came to be seen as critical to the defense of the Asian littoral. In Europe, first priority was the construction of NATO, and the United States was ready to pay the French a substantial price for their agreement to the rearming of West Germany. In February 1950, the French National Assembly ratified the agreement establishing Emperor Bao Dai as the head of a nominally independent Vietnam. This pro forma gesture sufficed, in the circumstances, to assuage Washington's anticolonial bias, and the door opened to a program of direct US support to the French Expeditionary Corps.

No amount of material aid could compensate for anachronistic colonial policies and incompetent leadership, and the French absorbed a series of humiliating defeats. By late 1953, the Laniel government was looking for a

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negotiated way out even as it accepted the \$400 million offered by Dulles as an incentive to pursue the struggle. Still anxious to preserve the French position in Indochina, the United States joined the multilateral negotiations which began in Geneva in late April 1954. This hope dissolved with the fall of the French redoubt at Dien Bien Phu in early May, but the Chinese were eager to avoid direct US military intervention and intimated to the French that they would press the Viet Minh to compromise. On 20 July, an agreement between the French and Vietnamese military commands declared a truce and established the 17th parallel as the line of demarcation between Communist-controlled North Vietnam and French-administered South Vietnam.⁴

As the Viet Minh wore down the French defenders at Dien Bien Phu, both Washington and Paris had started looking for indigenous candidates to govern whatever Vietnamese territory might be saved from the Communists. American and French objectives in Indochina were quite different, as they had been from the beginning. The Eisenhower administration was preoccupied with the containment of Communism while the French were almost equally single-minded in trying to preserve their own economic privileges. Both, however, were looking for an anti-Communist politician receptive to Western guidance and possessing nationalist credentials strong enough to make him a plausible competitor to Ho Chi Minh.

The candidates were few. With the advantages of Ho's charisma, the impending victory against the French, and superior political organization, the Viet Minh commanded the loyalty not only of convinced Communists but of many non-Communist nationalists as well. The other nationalists contended against each other in a welter of tiny, conspiratorial parties. Most of these lacked any roots in the agrarian base of the society and none had a popular base in the rice-rich provinces of the Mekong Delta. Vietnamese with technical or administrative skills were mostly assimilated into the French culture, and many were French citizens.

Ngo Dinh Diem had established his nationalist credentials in the early 1930s by quitting as the puppet emperor's Interior Minister when the French obstructed his proposed reforms. In the early 1950s, living in the United States, he came to be seen by some influential legislators as the best hope for an anti-Communist leadership in Vietnam. He had many weaknesses, including the lack of any organized following, but in the end emerged almost by default as the joint Franco-American candidate. On 18 June 1954, Emperor Bao Dai invited Diem to form a government to replace that of the Francophile courtier Prince Buu Loc.

⁴ Dates are given in Harry G. Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac* (Facts on File Publications, 1985), p. 24

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~~SECRET//X1~~**Covert Action as an Instrument of Nation-Building**

What Joseph Alsop several years later called the "miracle" of the Agency's success in Vietnam was the product of CIA's close relationships with Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother and confidant Ngo Dinh Nhu.⁵ CIA's energy and self-confidence in managing these relationships contrasted sharply with State Department caution and reflected an institutional ethos inherited from the Office of Strategic Services. This aggressive, enterprising spirit was encouraged by the Eisenhower Administration's confidence in covert operations as a means of containing Soviet expansion. As a result, by mid-1954 there was ample precedent for the Agency to take a lead role in Vietnam. CIA had restored the Shah of Iran to his throne in 1953 and in March 1954, just before the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, had sponsored a successful military coup against the leftist government in Guatemala. Earlier, CIA's support to the Christian Democrats in the 1948 Italian elections helped ensure the survival of democratic government there. In the Philippines, the Agency's close relationship with Ramon Magsaysay beginning in 1950 was perceived as a major factor in the defeat of the Huk rebellion.

In all these cases the purpose was the same, to establish a viable anti-Communist regime in a country seen as threatened with absorption into the Soviet Bloc. But although the goal in Indochina was the same, Vietnam presented CIA, and the US Government as a whole, with a fundamentally different problem. In the other cases the task was to find and install acceptable leadership in a functioning, if perhaps undeveloped, nation-state. This might be done by sponsoring individual leaders, as in Iran and the Philippines, or by supporting a political party, as in Italy.

Vietnam was different. In the territory south of the 17th parallel, which Americans at first called Free Vietnam, there existed neither a sense of nationhood nor an indigenous administration. Cochin China, comprised of Saigon and the Mekong Delta, had had only a tenuous connection with the imperial authority in Hue before becoming a French colony. Annam, in the center, was now cut in half. And the Geneva Accords did not even in theory create a new state. The 17th parallel designated a truce line, not an international boundary, and the entirely provisional entity lying south of it was supposed to disappear after national elections in 1956.

⁵ Alsop's remark was made several years later, in a conversation with Joseph Redick in Laos, which Alsop visited while Redick was stationed there (Redick interview, 28 September 1989). Notes of the interviews conducted for this study and the tapes of recorded interviews are on file at the CIA History Staff.

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Free Vietnam lacked not only an administrative apparatus but also a cadre of indigenous politicians accustomed to the exercise of power. All of this meant that with the decision to support Ngo Dinh Diem the United States was undertaking not only to establish a leader but to create a country. This formidable assignment was complicated from the very start by fundamental disagreements with Diem—mutual incomprehension might be more accurate—over the kind of leadership required and the kind of polity to be built. And for the first 10 months of the venture, French officials in Saigon obstructed US efforts to make Diem head of government in fact as well as title.

The absence of any conceptual common ground with Diem was evident in the various elements of the American Mission in Saigon and in the US Government in general. The Embassy in Saigon, reflecting the bias of the State Department's European Bureau, placed greater importance on preserving Franco-American relations than on constructing a viable regime in Saigon. The other parts of the US mission—the military and economic aid sections, the US Information Service, and CIA—were more disposed to let the French fend for themselves while the United States got on with the work of building resistance to Communist aggression. But even here, there were conflicts. The military advisory group was continually at odds with Washington over the competing requirements of defense against both invasion by the North Vietnamese Army and domestic Viet Minh insurgency. From the beginning both military and civilian officials in Washington saw insurgency as the primary menace, while a succession of senior military advisors in Saigon worried most about invasion.⁶

The CIA presence in Saigon also worked at cross purposes, not just with the Department of State, but with itself. As noted earlier, the Agency maintained two independent elements during the first two years of Diem's rule. Although they cooperated to help Diem deal with immediate threats to his survival in office, they developed conflicting approaches to the long-term issue of constructing for him a base of mass political support. The result was that CIA advisors to Diem and Nhu contradicted each other, usually unwittingly, on this fundamental issue until unitary command was established in late 1956.⁷

⁶ Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, United States Army, 1985), chapters 12-14.

⁷ Redick interview, 28 September 1989; Orren Magill, interview by author, tape recording, McLean, VA, 11 October 1989 (hereafter cited as Magill interview, 11 October 1989), at CIA History Staff. Orren Magill said he served as Lansdale's liaison officer with the regular Station from mid- to late 1954, then as an operations officer in the regular Station until 1959. Paul Harwood was chief of the covert action section of the Station from spring 1954 to spring 1956. Rufus Phillips was an officer in Lansdale's Station, concerned primarily with military civic action, from 1954 to 1955.

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The confusion and disagreement were probably inevitable, for the United States had taken on a gigantic and perhaps impossible task. It had recognized, but not come to terms with, the dilemma inherent in the widespread belief that the French presence in Indochina was both part of the problem and indispensable to a solution. There was no precedent for what Washington wanted done. There was no nation-building or counterinsurgency doctrine and, therefore, no bureaucratic machinery to implement such a doctrine. Any optimism to be found in mid-1954 stemmed from the hope that the United States might be able to inspire and mobilize the non-Communist Vietnamese in a way denied to the French by their unrepentant colonial purposes. It was in this atmosphere that the CIA began relationships with successive heads of government in South Vietnam that lasted for 21 years.

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CHAPTER 2

Patrons and Clients

Ngo Dinh Diem's attractiveness to his first American patrons derived from three qualities: he was a certified anti-Communist nationalist, he was a Roman Catholic, and he understood English. Diem established his anticolonialist reputation in 1933, the year he was appointed Interior Minister in the imperial government that served the French as the instrument of indirect rule in Tonkin and Annam. He resigned after only a few months, protesting French interference with his proposed reforms. A flirtation with the Japanese toward the end of World War II reflected his nationalist values more than it compromised them, driven as it was by his hostility to the return of the French. After the war he displayed his anti-Communism by rejecting an invitation from Ho Chi Minh to join the Viet Minh government. In 1949, courted this time by the French, Diem spurned an offer to make him their puppet prime minister.¹

Diem's religion did not necessarily recommend him to every American influential in Indochina matters, but it helped win the favor of such prominent figures as Francis Cardinal Spellman, and Senators Mike Mansfield and John F. Kennedy. And even non-Catholics could see his religious affiliation as confirming his anti-Communism. Diem's access to official Americans was also the product of his competence in English, rare in Vietnamese of that period, which he acquired while living with the Maryknoll missionaries in New Jersey and New York between 1951 and 1953. Residence in the US also gave him a platform for the vigorous lobbying that made him an early frontrunner when the United States began looking for indigenous leaders for Vietnam.²

To his early supporters, Diem's anticolonialism and anti-Communism, buttressed by unquestioned personal integrity, qualified him for national leadership. Others in Washington were more skeptical. A State Department officer

¹ George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1987), 79-80; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 213-217; William Henderson, "South Vietnam Finds Itself," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1957.

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who met him in late 1950 reported that Diem had no constructive solutions, only "vague and defamatory" references to the French and an apparent belief that "only [the] US can solve [the] problem, thru him to be sure."³ The working level at State remained wary throughout Diem's stay in the US, but as Cold War tensions grew, he found new supporters, among them Congressman Walter Judd (R-ND), who was influential in East Asian affairs, and Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-MN).⁴ []

The diversity of American reactions to Diem reflected different expectations of him. His piety impressed the Catholics, and his patriotism and personal honesty impressed everyone who was not distracted by his flaws. These included a narrow and rigid mind, a near-obsession with the evils of French colonialism, and an inability to engage in genuine dialogue. For a real exchange of information and ideas, Diem tended to substitute endless monologues that exhausted his listeners without necessarily addressing their interests. A US military officer attending a meeting with him in 1953 left with the impression that he had been listening to a "mystic 'nut.'"⁵ Thus, while some of his American interlocutors saw him as the only hope for the anti-Communist cause in Vietnam, others saw him as incapacitated by both personal limitations and lengthy absence from the political scene. []

Before his brief tenure as Interior Minister in 1933, Diem had served as district chief and province chief in Central Vietnam (Annam). With the exception of this service, he had no prior administrative experience when he took over the government in 1954. His political assets at that point consisted of his reputation for nationalism and personal probity, a modest following in Central Vietnam, and the loyalty of those—at the time, perhaps five percent of the population—who shared his Catholic faith. He seems to have taken for granted the unquestioning obedience and personal loyalty of anyone commit-

² The dates of Diem's residence in the US are given as January 1951 to May 1953 in an untitled brief, Department of State, Division of Biographical Information, dated November 1954. []

[] Diem's lobbying for US support is described in Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 79. Gene Gregory, an officer of the US Information Service who had worked with Ngo family supporters [] in Vietnam took the initiative in introducing Diem to the State Department in Washington. []

³ US Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *The US Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part I, 1945-61* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 90. []

⁴ Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 80. []

⁵ George W. Allen, *The Indochina Wars, 1950-75* (unpublished monograph), p. 97, in CIA History Staff files. The officer found Diem's English incomprehensible, and said he also "made little sense in French." []

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ted to an independent, non-Communist Vietnam.⁶ The scarcity of competent people with this disposition helps explain Diem's reliance from the beginning on members of his family to run the government.⁷

The problem was vividly described by Tran Chanh Thanh, a former Viet Minh who became of Minister of Information in 1955.

There are just not enough educated Vietnamese...half of [them] are in Hanoi, and half the remainder are in Paris, [the other] half of the remainder are here, and half of that won't work with us. So, ...whenever we find a man can do a job efficiently, the President gives him two.⁸

Diem was personally modest and uncomfortable with ceremony. Immune to the ego demands of the charismatic personality, he made himself the servant of his self-assigned mission. This monomania had its disadvantages, perhaps the greatest of which was insensitivity to the interests and needs of other people, both his followers and the fence-sitters whose loyalty had to be won, not taken for granted. Tran Trung Dung, Diem's deputy defense minister, is a case in point.



Assistant Defense Minister Tran Trung Dung (courtesy of Paul Harwood).

⁶ Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 79.

⁷ The Station's early recognition of this proclivity is recorded in FVSA 746, 13 August 1954,

⁸ Paul Harwood, interview, 10 June 1964, Far East Division History Project,

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Dung was a good man but...he had what is sometimes called galloping consumption and...[was] just not physically capable of working...18 to 20 hours a day. He'd ask for leave, and Diem would ask, why do you have to take leave, you are still on your feet. This was the...distasteful part of working with Diem, he was absolutely impossible to deal with.⁹ []

The absence of personal empathy and communication at the human level seems to have governed even Diem's family relationships. Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's younger brother and closest advisor, told [] in 1954 that Diem simply could not be influenced. He "won't listen, he sits there with his ears closed." The same officer said of Diem that he "lived with God," not as a second divinity, but in another world, like a "cloistered monk." So far as this Station officer could see, not even brother Nhu, as the prime minister's closest confidant, had a spontaneously human relationship with him.¹⁰ []

Ngo Dinh Nhu: Alter Ego and Scapegoat []

Their experience with Diem in the 1930s might have shown the French what to expect from Ngo Dinh Diem, but in mid-1954 they seem to have hoped that he would be hospitable to the preservation of their interests in the South. But Diem quickly disabused them of any notion that he would be as malleable as his predecessor, Prince Buu Loc. Diem's prompt display of intransigence needed an explanation, and the French found it in the person of Ngo Dinh Nhu. Eleven years younger than Diem, Nhu had been educated in France as an archivist and paleographer. Unlike his brother, Nhu was in Vietnam in the years just preceding the French collapse and was active in the party politics that Diem ignored. Around 1948, he founded the Parti Travailleiste (Workers Party), which despite its small size—it was hardly more than a semi-clandestine discussion group—kept the colonial authorities aware of his anti-French convictions. During the first year of Diem's rule, the French developed an unreasoning aversion to Nhu that they effectively communicated to the US Embassy in Saigon.¹¹ []

Nhu reciprocated this French antipathy and actively abetted his brother's concentration during that first year on expelling the colonial presence. The French were right about Nhu's importance to Diem, but almost certainly wrong in seeing Nhu as the source of Diem's intransigence. Nothing in Agency

⁹ Harwood interviews, 21 June 1990 and 10 June 1964, [] []

¹⁰ Harwood interviews, 21 June 1990 and 10 June 1964, [] CIA's [] with Diem and Nhu and described below. []

¹¹ Harwood interview, 17 October 1989; FVSA 633, 21 May 1954, and FVSA 1542, 5 September 1955, []

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Ngo Dinh Nhu.

accounts of the period suggests that anyone but Diem set the government's priorities or that Nhu played any role but that of executive agent. Indeed, found Nhu diffident at first about making even routine operational decisions; his impulse was always first to consult Diem.¹²

But Nhu's function was no less important for being that of loyal factotum. If the policy arena belonged to Diem, its implementation became the province of his younger brother. This division of responsibility, which the passage of time only reinforced, was a product of three things. First was the administrative vacuum that confronted the new government. The colonial administration had consciously restricted Vietnamese access to positions of discretionary power, and the French departure left the government staffed with Vietnamese who, whatever their nominal rank, were little more than clerks in a system designed to serve French interests.¹³

Second was Diem's indifference to the mechanics of government. Even the CIA people in Saigon, generally more sympathetic than the Embassy staff, saw him as a hopelessly incompetent administrator who always lost the forest in the trees. Third, Diem proved unable to attract such administrative talent as was to be found in Saigon and to delegate real authority to the few good people serving him. The Workers Party had no vertical structure, and Nhu had no organizational or administrative experience.¹⁴

¹² Harwood interview, 14 February 1990.

¹³ FVSA 746, 13 August 1954, filed FVSA 1542, 5 September 1955, filed

¹⁴ Harwood interviews, 10 June 1964 and 26 October 1989

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Nhu did, however, have an intense interest in the theory of political organization. He was also the only member of the family other than Ngo Dinh Thuc, a third brother who was the Catholic bishop of a diocese in the Mekong Delta, to have a circle of political contacts in Saigon. Nhu's style, formed in the days of his anti-French agitation, was essentially conspiratorial and anti-establishment. He tended to see government institutions as a colonial legacy to be manipulated or, failing that, obstructed or neutralized. Nhu's contempt for the urban elite, whose values he saw as "more foreign than Vietnamese," had as a corollary the need to build an entirely new national leadership, capable of imbuing the population of the South with Diem's brand of anti-Communist nationalism.¹⁵ []

The story of the failure of Nhu's institution-building efforts is, at the operational level, the story of the failure of the Diem regime. The CIA programs supporting these efforts did not prevent that failure, partly because the conceptual gulf between the Ngo brothers and their Agency contacts proved to be unbridgeable. But in 1954, all of that was still to come. During Diem's first year in office, with his survival very much in doubt, CIA was strikingly successful in helping him consolidate his government and in maintaining the US commitment to him as the instrument for preserving an independent, anti-Communist South Vietnam. []

Two Instruments of Covert Action []

By the time of Diem's inauguration in early July 1954, the CIA had been active in Vietnam for four years, primarily in efforts to strengthen French unconventional warfare operations against the Viet Minh. When the French agreed late in 1953 to negotiate the conflict in Indochina, the prospect suddenly loomed of their abandoning the struggle. In early 1954, as the Eisenhower administration began to anticipate stepping in for the French, the Agency started trying to identify Vietnamese leaders with whom it might work directly to resist further Viet Minh expansion. []

This exploration took two directions. First was the reestablishment of a covert action section in the Saigon Station. Unilateral covert action had been suspended in early 1953 under State Department pressure after the French exposed a paramilitary operation against the Viet Minh in Hanoi that the Agency had not cleared with them.¹⁶ French sensitivities were now less

¹⁵ Harwood interview, 10 June 1964, [] William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago and New York: Contemporary Books, 1989), p. 86. []

¹⁶ Unsigned memorandum, [] A marginal note by [] states that it could not have been written before late 1962. []

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important, and CIA in Saigon was to resume the direct assessment of nationalist politicians there. To revitalize the program, Headquarters chose Paul Harwood, then a newly promoted GS-12, who had a degree in Asian studies and had just completed a tour of duty in [redacted]. He arrived in Saigon in April 1954 and began working out of the Embassy on behalf of the Chief of Station (COS), Emmett McCarthy.¹⁷ [redacted]

The second approach was launched at a January 1954 meeting of the National Security Council when someone suggested that Colonel Edward Lansdale, USAF, renowned for his work as "kingmaker" in the Philippines, be commissioned to find a Vietnamese equivalent of Ramon Magsaysay. The NSC approved the assignment at about the time that Harwood arrived in Saigon, and Colonel Lansdale followed him in June, assigned to the Embassy as Assistant Air Attaché.¹⁸ [redacted]

Although he had worked briefly for the OSS in San Francisco during World War II, Lansdale was never a CIA employee. For the Manila assignment, he had been detailed to the Agency from the Air Force; this arrangement was now extended for his service in Vietnam. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen, the Director of Central Intelligence, directly participated in creating the assignment. Their participation resulted in Lansdale's being sent out as chief of a second Station, reporting neither to McCarthy in Saigon nor to the chief of the Far East Division, but directly to Allen Dulles.¹⁹ [redacted]

McCarthy's unit, to be called here the regular Station, [redacted]

[redacted] Although Lansdale began his tour of duty as Assistant Air Attaché at the Embassy, his staff, all in uniform, worked out of [redacted]

¹⁷ Harwood interview, 17 October 1989. [redacted]

¹⁸ Evan J. Parker, Jr., Chief, FE/4, Directorate of Plans, Memorandum for the Record, "Indochina Positioning of CIA PW Officer," 15 March 1954. [redacted]

¹⁹ Lansdale official personnel file. There was ample precedent for this kind of organizational anomaly. Before August 1952, when the Office of Special Operations (foreign intelligence) and the Office of Policy Coordination (covert action) merged into the Plans Directorate, each component maintained independent representations overseas. [redacted]

McCarthy's official title, as the first Chief of Station, was Senior Representative for Indochina (Clandestine Services Historical Paper 75, *The Saigon Liaison Mission, 1952-1954, August 1967*, p. 42, hereafter CSHP). The CIA designation for Lansdale's station was the Saigon Military Mission (SMM). There are also occasional references in Directorate of Operations correspondence to the Saigon Military Station. [redacted]

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the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). Eventually, Lansdale's unit acquired overt status as the core of the MAAG's National Security Division, responsible for civic action and rural pacification.²⁰

In the spring of 1954, as the Viet Minh wore down the French defenses at Dien Bien Phu, the regular Station, was still oriented primarily toward intelligence cooperation with the French. It also ran a modest intelligence collection effort conducted unilaterally—that is, not acknowledged to the French—plus the covert action section, still immobilized by the moratorium of April 1953. The regular Station grew slightly as help arriving for Harwood brought its strength up the same level eventually reached by Lansdale's team. The two elements led by Lansdale and Harwood were supposed to work directly with the Vietnamese, inventing and implementing ways to consolidate the authority of the new government. Meanwhile, the Station's liaison element, supervised by McCarthy, gradually reoriented its efforts away from the French and toward cooperation with newly formed or newly independent Vietnamese intelligence and security agencies.²¹

Headquarters left both Stations, McCarthy's and Lansdale's, largely to their own devices in the development of new programs. Beyond occasional resistance to what he saw as intrusions on his turf, McCarthy made no effort to influence Lansdale's program. Nor did he seek to ensure coordination between Lansdale and Harwood, even in the sensitive area of their respective relationships with the Palace. Lansdale, although dependent on McCarthy's communications facilities, seldom coordinated any correspondence with him, and Harwood seems not to have seen this de facto compartmentation as creating any risk or inconvenience.²²

McCarthy, by contrast, seemed uncomfortable not only with the Lansdale relationship but with the management of Harwood's covert action element. Harwood remembered being asked by Nhu in May 1954 about the terms under which the US would support Diem's bid to become prime minister. Two weeks after his request for guidance, having received no response from either McCarthy or Headquarters, Harwood proceeded to formulate his own terms. These drew on Harwood's understanding of the kind of agreement that the US Mission in Saigon hoped to establish with any new government. They

²⁰ CSHP 113, *The Saigon Military Mission, June 1954 to December 1956*, 2 vols., October 1970, Vol. 1, pp. 40-43.

²¹ CSHP 75, pp. 83-85.

²² Redick interview, 28 September 1989.

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included direct US participation in training the army and uncompromising resistance by the government to any Viet Minh encroachment on southern territory.²³

Once Nhu accepted the terms, Harwood was committed to support the effort to install Diem as prime minister. Perhaps embarrassed by its own non-feasance, Headquarters accepted without comment Harwood's unauthorized commitment and proceeded directly into a discussion of operational programs. According to Harwood, this kind of supervisory lacuna typified the Headquarters style of the period, and he thought the pressure it created helped produce condition that led to McCarthy's recall in February 1955.²⁴

Surrogate Links to Washington

The US Ambassador quickly absorbed the French distaste for Diem's brother and advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and this may account for the fact that by July 1954, Paul Harwood had become the only American official in regular contact with him. At this point, Diem was beginning to respond to Lansdale's calculated effort, endorsed by the Ambassador, to become the Prime Minister's unofficial advisor. Throughout this early period, the Vietnamese were accessible to a wide range of other Americans, both official and unofficial, but the Agency relationships with Diem and Nhu provided both the largest element of continuing influence on the new government and the greatest flow of information on its perceptions and intentions.²⁵

Diem and Nhu saw Lansdale and Harwood as alternative channels to Washington when Embassy contacts seemed unresponsive, and eagerly exploited CIA's readiness to help establish the new government's authority.²⁶ Lansdale never acknowledged to Diem his Agency affiliation, but this connection had been widely suspected in the Philippines, and Diem had doubtless heard rumors about it. In any case, Lansdale made no secret with Diem of his direct communication with policy-level Washington. This link completed the chain of relationships that made the Agency's role in Vietnam so crucial. The key element in this was Lansdale's standing with the Dulles brothers, which gave him more influence over policymakers in Washington than he exercised over the Vietnamese Government in Saigon.²⁷

²³ FVSA 673, 2 June 1954,

²⁴ Harwood interview, 26 October 1989,

²⁵ Ibid.,

²⁶ FVSA-1542, 5 September 1955, gives the Station's perception of the utility to Nhu of his CSHP 113, II, written by Lansdale, contains numerous references to Diem's requests for meetings with Lansdale.

²⁷ Caswell interview, 27 February 1990,

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At this time, CIA activism and commitment contrasted sharply with ambassadorial detachment. The first two US ambassadors attached great importance to the protection of French interests in Vietnam and were openly skeptical of Diem's qualifications and prospects. The MAAG and the US Information Service (USIS) were both inclined to favor Diem, even at the price of difficulties with the French. The MAAG was an important CIA ally in dealings with the Vietnamese military, both the national army and the sect forces.²⁸ But the MAAG and USIS saw their charters in narrower terms than the CIA stations viewed their own; Lansdale and Harwood would discuss and try to help solve almost any problem that Diem or Nhu might raise. The result was that, during most of the first year, real communication with the Vietnamese on political issues took place in CIA channels.

Because of the informality of this communication and the mutual confidence that seems to have characterized especially the relationship with Nhu, the record of the period does more than illuminate the Agency's operative role in the regime's survival. It also offers a uniquely intimate insight into the leadership of the Saigon government before disagreement and misunderstanding introduced an adversarial element into its dealings even with the CIA.

There is no doubt that the US Ambassador and his senior staff could, if the Ambassador chose, have taken on the advisory role so quickly assumed by Paul Harwood and Edward Lansdale. But the first two Ambassadors to Diem's government, Donald Heath and General J. Lawton Collins, chose for different reasons not to do so.

Heath, a career Foreign Service officer, became Chief of Mission in Saigon in 1950. He was Europe-oriented and sympathized with the French desire to retain a presence in Indochina. On the personal level, he seems to have been influenced by the French antipathy toward Diem and Nhu, sharing the particular distaste for Nhu. During the first months of the new regime, Heath supported French pressure on Diem to protect local French interests, so there was little warmth in his relationship with the new government.²⁹

Heath left Saigon four months after Diem took office, and was replaced by retired General J. Lawton Collins. The new ambassador, a distinguished World War II combat leader who served as the US Army's Chief of Staff during the Korean war, quickly took Diem's measure and just as quickly found him wanting. In December, a month after his arrival, he told Washington that "Diem does

²⁸ CSHP 113, II (pages 4-6, 9, 15) details the early help Lansdale obtained from the chiefs of USIS and the MAAG.

²⁹ Harwood interview, 10 June 1964.

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not have the capacity to unify the divided factions in Vietnam."³⁰ More hopeful in January, he changed his mind again in March and in April 1955 formally recommended to John Foster Dulles that Diem be replaced.³¹

Collins's perceptions were shrewd, but his argument sometimes was naive. He unsparingly described Diem's rigidity and suspicion, his unwillingness to share power outside the family, and his "apparent incapacity for creative thinking and planning." But the analysis of alternatives was marred by his ethnocentrism: "We are not dealing here with fully rational, educated, unbiased Westerners."³² Diem, for his part, had no more gift for crosscultural communication than Collins, and he also entirely lacked a capacity for personal empathy. The prospects for mutual comprehension were therefore nil.

During one encounter in early 1955, Diem turned down Collins's nominee for command of the Vietnamese Army. Collins wanted competence, and Diem wanted loyalty. At his next meeting with the Station, a frustrated Nhu declared that his relationship with Harwood now constituted the official government-to-government communications channel. The Palace did not enforce this impulsive edict, but the incident reflected both the absence of rapport between government and Embassy, and Diem's confidence in his Agency contacts to get his point of view to Washington.³³

³⁰ Collins to Defense Department, 16 December 1954, 751G.00/12-1654, Records of Department of State, quoted in Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1985), p. 247.

³¹ J. Lawton Collins, Telegram to Department of State, 7 April 1955, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57, Vol. I, Vietnam* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), pp. 218-220 (hereafter cited as FRUS).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

³³ Harwood interview, 18 October 1989.

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The Ngo family's relationship with CIA had its beginning long before Diem's accession to office. Ngo Dinh Nhu met Edward Korn, in 1951.¹

Nhu was the Agency's main political action contact in Saigon until the January 1953 flap in Hanoi that produced the operational standdown.



Nhu as Catholic social activist.

From late 1953 until Harwood's arrival, a contract employee named Virginia Spence maintained the relationship on a social basis with Nhu's wife. Spence had been hired for her proficiency in French and was sent to Saigon, apparently without operations training, to serve in what seems to have been a clerical capacity. But she was socially adept and developed a genuine friendship with the Nhus. She also recognized

¹ Later, Korn-Patterson.

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the importance to Nhu of her CIA affiliation, and how material support helped save the relationship after a gaffe she still vividly recalled 10 years later.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Nhu's Agency contacts soon saw that he looked at the relationship in terms of their ability and willingness to help him advance his own agenda. But he was open about his associates, and Spence later remembered how quickly he responded to her requests to meet such people as his brother, Bishop Thuc, and labor leader Tran Quoc Buu. Noting the secretiveness and deception that marked his later behavior, Spence recalled that, at the time, "he needed us far more than we needed him." She was equally perceptive about the anti-Viet Minh nationalist politicians, observing shortly before Diem's appointment that:

These men who have schemed and fought and gone without to get political power don't have any idea what to do with it now that it's within their grasp. All the shouts of "Throw out the French," "Throw out Bao Dai," "Up democracy," "Down communism" don't do a thing for the day-to-day running of a government. They are like the bride who couldn't see beyond the end of the church aisle. Now someone is going to...ask them to collect taxes and do something for the working man and I think they're scared. They need support, all right, but they don't realize how much.³ [REDACTED]

Harwood quickly came to much the same conclusion. For the first several weeks after his arrival, he left the Nhu contact in Spence's capable hands while he sounded out other non-Communist nationalists, looking at first for people to launch resistance operations in the North. Nguyen Ton Hoan, leader of a nationalist splinter group known as the Southern Dai Viet Party, had a "nasty habit of leaving his hardware all over the place—.45 caliber automatics dropping out of his pockets." But Harwood gave him a chance to demonstrate the existence of an anti-Viet Minh apparatus in Hanoi. Hoan failed to produce,

² Virginia Spence interview by Thomas L. Ahern, 31 July 1964, [REDACTED] in CIA History Staff files (hereafter cited as Spence interview). [REDACTED]

³ Spence interview; FVSA 673, 4 June 1954, [REDACTED]

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and so did the other local politicians Harwood tested. Nhu quickly emerged as the most promising of an unimpressive lot, having at least some access to a potential mass base through organized labor and the Cao Dai sect.⁴ []

The Station had no illusions about either Nhu's personal qualifications or his influence on the local political scene. Spence described Nhu and his Workers' Party cadres as "seven busy little politicians." She saw him as a "born schemer" whose potential looked greater for covert action than for intelligence collection:

Anything a friend tells him he swallows whole. He does have a certain political stature and a great flair for making nothing look like something.. []

But Nhu was intelligent, energetic, and passionately nationalistic. At the time, he displayed what Harwood saw as liberal impulses that offered the prospect of a compatible joint approach to questions of political organization. In any case, there was nobody else.⁶ []

Accordingly, Harwood set out in May to help Nhu build a covert political action organization. Again, the shortage of qualified people inhibited progress. An example was Tran Van Do, an uncle of Nhu's wife. Nhu thought him deficient in energy and courage and could think of no more active role for him than that of safehouse keeper, exploiting the immunity conferred by his social position from unannounced visits by French security. But the scarcity of loyal talent was such that a few months later he became Diem's foreign minister.⁷ []

Another problem was the absence of any solid political organization. Spence said that what Nhu had was "six good men and true, and a potential mass of well-wishers, and nothing in between."⁸ While Harwood explored operational possibilities with Nhu, trying to remedy or work around this organizational vacuum, the State Department began discussing with the French a new government for non-Communist Vietnam. At Headquarters' request, Harwood told Nhu at a meeting in May that there were "plans which might involve Diem." He said the Agency understood the brothers to be in contact and asked if Diem would accept a position other than that of prime minister. Nhu's answer was a categorical "no."⁹ []

⁴ Harwood interview, 10 June 1964, []

⁵ []

⁶ FVSA 629, 21 May 1954, []

⁷ Harwood interview, 10 June 1964, [] In April 1955, Ambassador Collins even suggested that Do would make a better prime minister than Diem (*FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam*, p. 220). []

⁸ FVSA 688, 23 June 1954, []

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CIA and Emperor Dai []

What generated this query from Headquarters about Diem is not known, but some historians believe that Bao Dai appointed Diem at the instigation of CIA. Agency records do not entirely resolve the question but suggest, at most, a peripheral CIA role. John Anderton, McCarthy's successor as Chief of Station, thought that the French had promoted Diem's candidacy "with US concurrence and support" and that the French only turned hostile to Diem when they discovered that he would be less malleable than his predecessor. Two of Anderton's subordinates thought it was the other way around, that the French had only grudgingly acceded to American insistence. But neither specified any Agency role in this arm-twisting of the French. When Virginia Spence told Headquarters in April 1954 that Nhu thought French Prime Minister Laniel favored Diem, the tone of the report did not suggest any understanding on her part that the Agency was trying to influence the outcome.¹⁰ []

One Agency history says that CIA-supported assets may have encouraged Bao Dai to make the appointment; if true, this was obviously unknown to the Saigon Station.¹¹ The only records mentioning an Agency relationship with Bao Dai are a November 1954 proposal [] apparently to persuade him to keep Diem in office, and a memorandum to the Deputy Director for Plans that refers to a [] one of whose tasks is "influencing Bao Dai to support Diem."¹² []

In fact, John Foster Dulles and the French seem to have concluded, more or less simultaneously, that there was no alternative to Diem. On 24 May, the US Embassy in Paris moved to "reestablish contact" with Diem to discuss his negotiations with Bao Dai.¹³ []

⁹ FVSA 633, 21 May 1954, []

¹⁰ Interviews with John Anderton, 20 November 1963, [] Phillip Potter, 23 October 1963, [] and [] 18 April 1964, [] FVSA 629, 21 May 1954, []

¹¹ Roberta S. Knapp, *The Central Intelligence Agency--The First Thirty Years, 1947-1977* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency History Staff, 1990), p. 116. []

¹² Frank G. Wisner, Memorandum for L. Randolph Higgs, Deputy Operations Coordinator, Department of State, "Proposal to [] Bao Dai," 17 November 1954, [] [] George Aurell, Chief, FE Division, untitled memorandum for the Deputy Director for Plans, 26 January 1955, *ibid.*, []

¹³ Douglas Dillon, Telegram to Department of State, 24 May 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-54, Indochina* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 13:2, p. 1608. Also, see S. M. Bao Dai, *Le Dragon d'Annam* (Plon, 1980), p. 328; cited in Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 78; Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1970), p. 128; and John Foster Dulles, Telegram to Department of State, 8 May 1955, US Department of State, *FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam*, p. 374. []

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As Diem's appointment came to look more probable, the CIA role grew more active. Harwood, as noted earlier, asked his superiors for the terms on which he could commit covert assistance through Nhu. At the end of May, getting no response, Harwood made up his own terms and delegated Spence to take them to Nhu. These conditions, to which Nhu agreed, called for prosecuting the war against the Viet Minh and opposition to "coalition and partition." The US would train the Army even over French objections, and the Vietnamese would take particular care in selecting commanders for the internal security organs and the military. The terms also included a requirement for CIA access to Bao Dai in order to prevent him from dismissing a Diem government "on a whim," and for the continued secrecy of the liaison with CIA.¹⁴

Harwood's unilateral action in this episode not only dispensed with Headquarters guidance, as already noted, but took CIA quite outside its charter into the area of policy. Whether Headquarters eventually sought State Department endorsement of his program is not recorded; any departure from what became US policy after Diem's nomination was apparently minor enough to attract no attention.

In May, CIA wanted to know not only Diem's intentions but what ambitions Nhu might be harboring for himself. Nhu insisted that he would accept no position in his brother's Cabinet, and Spence believed he had "worked so long covertly he couldn't bear to do otherwise."¹⁵ But he anticipated working closely with Diem and declared his willingness to serve as intermediary. Hoping to use the connection for covert action as well as collection purposes, the Station pressed Nhu to describe his influence over Diem. Nhu replied, probably with tongue in cheek, that he could "direct" his brother.¹⁶

CIA Advisors to Diem and Nhu

Even before Diem emerged as a candidate to head the government, Nhu's talents and willingness to work with the Agency had helped make him the focus of CIA covert action planning. Unburdened either by his brother's withdrawn personality or by the endemic Vietnamese xenophobia, Nhu readily agreed to work with Paul Harwood. Like Virginia Spence, Harwood found Nhu open and honest about his compatriots, including his brother Diem; since Nhu was reporting here on matters in which he was directly involved, Spence's reservations about his reliability did not apply. He was receptive to

¹⁴ FVSA 673, 2 June 1954,

¹⁵ FVSA 673, 4 June 1954,

¹⁶ FVSA 688, 23 June 1954,

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advice [redacted] and authorized direct CIA contact with key collaborators including Tran Chanh Thanh, later the information minister; and labor leader Tran Quoc Buu.¹⁷ [redacted]

On the personal level, Harwood found Nhu sociable and witty. He could display a puckish sense of humor, as on one occasion when he kissed Mrs. Harwood's hand in a gesture both genuinely affectionate and mocking of colonial etiquette. He was indifferent to any perquisites, and for more than a year after Diem's accession Nhu continued to live in a small house near the Central Market. The cordiality of his early relationship with CIA survived chronic mutual disappointments on policy matters, and the Harwoods became confirmation sponsors to the Nhus' eldest daughter.¹⁸ [redacted]



Confirmation ceremony for the Nhus' daughter Le Thuy. From left: Ngo Dinh Nhu, Mrs. Harwood, Lee Thuy, Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc with Nhus' son Quynh, son Trac, Paul Harwood, Madame Nhu (photo courtesy of Paul Harwood).

Family jokes that the Nhus shared with the Harwoods reflect the spontaneity of the relationship. Some were at the expense of Diem's archaic personal and political style, others at the expense of Nhu's wife. As a relatively recent convert, Madame Nhu was less intimidated by the clergy than most Vietnamese Catholics, and Nhu would teasingly call her a "pagan." She was also free

¹⁷ Harwood interview, 10 June 1964, [redacted]

¹⁸ FVSA 1542, 5 September 1955, [redacted] Harwood interviews, 10 June 1964, [redacted] and 26 October 1989, [redacted]

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of undue reverence for Diem and seemed to enjoy an anecdote she shared with Mrs. Harwood that involved her four-year-old son, nicknamed Quang-Quang. The child once wandered into a Cabinet meeting looking for his uncle. Someone pointed to a bathroom door at the end of the conference room, and Quang-Quang opened it, revealing the seated Prime Minister. Mimicking official protocol, Quang-Quang executed a hand salute and began singing the national anthem.¹⁹



"Quang-Quang" saluting
(photo courtesy of Paul Harwood).

The anecdote illustrates the intimacy of the Harwoods' relationship with the Nhu family. This contact might well have sufficed as the sole basis for the Agency's role as unofficial advisor to the Palace, but the presence of Edward Lansdale resulted in direct CIA access to both the principal figures in the new government.

Edward Lansdale had come to Saigon in June and was waiting for Diem when he returned from France. Lansdale later described in his memoirs having walked in on him unannounced the day after Diem took office on 7 July 1954. Lansdale had enlisted George Hellyer, the Mission's public information officer, to make the introduction, and Hellyer also interpreted as Lansdale spoke no French. Although Diem had studied English while living in the US,

¹⁹ Paul Harwood, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, McLean, VA, 16 May 1990; Harwood interview, 21 June 1990.

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he apparently never volunteered to use it with Lansdale; for two and half years of continuous association they communicated through an interpreter. Lucien Conein, one of Lansdale's men, said later that, "I think Lansdale surprised the hell out of him. ... I don't believe Diem thought he was going to last very long. What could he lose by talking to this man?"²⁰

Lansdale's success in the Philippines encouraged him to believe that he had discovered the key to defeating Communist-led insurgencies. Exuding confidence when Harwood and others saw imminent defeat, Lansdale quickly came up with a formula for Vietnam. On 11 July, he announced to DCI Dulles that his goal was nothing less than to build a "political base" in Indochina which, if successful, would "give CIA control [of the] government and change [the] whole atmosphere." Diem was an "unworldly dreamer but seeking help," and Lansdale had just written a three-year plan which, he told Dulles, Ambassador Heath was going to help him sell to the Prime Minister. If all went well, CIA would have advisors in all key areas, and Lucien Conein would conduct liaison with the Armed Forces if General Nguyen Van Vy, a friend since Conein's OSS service in Vietnam, became chief of staff.²¹

Heath and Lansdale visited Diem on the 12th, and the Ambassador encouraged Diem to accept Lansdale as a personal advisor. Having made this endorsement, Heath spent most of the meeting describing for Diem the US view of the implications of partition between North and South. It was not until that evening that Lansdale got the opportunity to explain his program, which included "emergency adoption" of the Philippine Constitution, electing an "interim advisory congress," attracting the sect armies into the national forces, and launching a variety of organizational reforms.²²

Never greatly concerned about protocol or bureaucratic discipline, Lansdale had presented his agenda to Diem before vetting it in Washington. But he correctly anticipated Agency agreement as Headquarters immediately set to work to win State Department concurrence. State objected only to the proposal to use Filipino advisors, and only because the Philippines had not yet recognized

²⁰ Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 157-159; Interview with Lucien Conein on 24 June 1985, quoted in Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: Unquiet American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. 152. Conein's perception may well have been accurate, although it ignores Diem's perennial habit of cultivating unofficial American connections. Three others, during this period, were Joseph Buttinger of the International Rescue Committee, land reform expert Wolf Ladejinski, and Wesley Fishel, head of the Michigan State University public administration team in Saigon.

²¹ SAIG 3321, 11 July 1954,

²² SAIG 3336, 12 July 1954,

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South Vietnam. By early August, State had reversed itself even on this, approving 20 Filipino "trainers in support of paramilitary and psychological warfare operations in Indochina."²³ []

Diem was, at least initially, greatly taken by Lansdale's freewheeling ideas, and added proposals of his own. He asked for plans to reorganize the Army and the Ministry of Defense, and, foreshadowing of his permanent preoccupation with foreign military support, suggested a Vietnam Foreign Legion. Diem noted that the Chinese Communists had never accused Germany of intervention in Indochina merely because of Germans serving in the French Foreign Legion, and he thought that anti-Communist governments in Asia should be similarly immune.²⁴ []

Hope for a Challenge to Ho Chi Minh []

Heath's concern with the effects of partition was fully shared by the two CIA Stations. Indeed, in mid-summer 1954, CIA in Vietnam was by no means reconciled to the permanence of Communist rule in Hanoi. On 12 July, Lansdale's representative in Hanoi joined McCarthy's man there in a passionate appeal to Saigon and Washington to support a nationalist resistance movement in the North. Acknowledging the political naiveté of its Vietnamese contacts, CIA in Hanoi argued that this could be overcome by pragmatic US counsel. These nationalists, they insisted, were at least preferable to past Vietnamese governments, which had enjoyed "warm US support" despite "corruption and complete lack [of] public support." The case rested on CIA Hanoi's perception that Vietnamese nationalism had always been strongest in the North and that active engagement in the anti-Communist cause was not to be expected from the nationalists in the Center and South "after the US has walked out on their Northern brothers." As the CIA people in Hanoi saw it, the loss of Tonkin would lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia.²⁵ []

Lansdale followed the Hanoi message with a cable asserting that the Vietnamese Army would shortly ask for material help. He said he would then "require [a] decision soonest on CIA policy re [a] guerrilla movement in North Vietnam." Adding that he feared destructive rivalry among guerrilla bands, he proposed to urge on Diem a unified resistance command. On 26 July, Lansdale predicted that many thousands would refuse to leave the North; they asked only for rice and ammunition, which he wanted CIA to

²³ George Aurell, Chief, FE Division, Memorandum for Robert C. Strong, Operations Coordinator, Office of the Undersecretary of State, "Proposed Advisor to Ngo Dinh Diem," 13 July 1954, and memorandums for George Aurell, Chief, FE Division, 21 July and 3 August 1954, []

²⁴ SAIG 3352, 15 July 1954, []

²⁵ []

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provide forthwith, along with exfiltration of leaders for training. But Harwood had reported four days earlier that the Ngo brothers had abandoned any notion of a "suicidal defense [of] Hanoi." They now intended to leave behind only small stay-behind units with specific missions against the Viet Minh, who were scheduled to take over Hanoi on 10 October.²⁶

But if Diem was resigned to a Communist assumption of power in Hanoi, Lansdale was not. Complaining to Dulles about Diem's indifference to unified command for stay-behind units in the North, he scornfully dismissed any need to accede to loss of the North. Saying that he suspected the French of trying to manipulate the South into accommodation with the North, he demanded, "Will the US Government stop playing [the] French parlor game in IC [Indochina]?" If so, he asserted, he could quickly form an effective resistance movement. Apparently believing that a change of government in France would somehow obviate the need for such a resistance program, he suggested as an alternative a "military coup in Paris to make [a] lady out of [a] slut." It would require, he thought, no more than a "handful [of] strongminded US officials to change [the] entire complexion [of the] world picture."²⁷

Meanwhile, more mundane problems in Saigon were absorbing US officials there. The Geneva Accords had established two deadlines, which during Diem's first weeks in office were already focusing attention on the need to increase popular support for his government. The first deadline allowed 300 days to relocate people who found themselves, after the Geneva Accords, on politically inhospitable ground. The second called for national elections to produce a unified Vietnamese government in July 1956. For Diem, the relocation deadline created two requirements. One was to resettle the refugees, mostly Catholics, coming down from the North. The other was to establish governmental authority in the countryside, especially in those portions of the South being vacated by the Viet Minh. The prospect of elections also required the construction of an organized base of popular support and the creation of a claim for Diem's authority above as well as below the 17th parallel.

The regular Station's contribution to this effort focused at first on the competition for legitimacy between Diem and Ho Chi Minh. As of late July 1954, Harwood was urging Nhu to follow up on the "National Revolution" themes of two Diem proclamations issued earlier that month. The Station wanted to put the onus on the Viet Minh, as stooges of the Communist Chinese, for the partition of Vietnam. This was fine with Diem, who had explicitly repudiated

²⁶ SAIG 3336; SAIG 3403, 22 July 1954, and SAIG 3419, 26 July 1954, *ibid.*

²⁷ SAIG 3352. No reaction from Dulles to the suggestion for a coup in Paris has been found.

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the partition. The irredentist theme also afforded a momentary reprieve from the need to deal with the narrow base of Diem's political support in the South.²⁸

From the beginning of its association with Diem, the regular Station recognized his limitations as a competitor to Ho Chi Minh. In August, Harwood noted that Diem's reliance on a few loyalists who regarded him as the salvation of the country was leading to government by coterie, which exempted Diem from political compromise. Harwood reported that the sects, Dai Viet politicians, some Catholic groups, and even the Binh Xuyen gang, "would like to offer their loyalty to the government for something in return, but Diem has shown little desire to...bargain." This attitude was not, as Harwood dryly noted; "a political asset which will attract mass support."²⁹

But as the Station saw it, it was not an unqualified liability either, at least in the short term. Reliance on family precluded Diem's being unseated by "ambitious underlings or a party trading on his name." In any case, he had no serious non-Communist challenger. The national elections mandated at Geneva were still almost two years away. Reports of resistance to the new regime in the North encouraged Harwood to think, for a short time, that it might be possible to make Diem a competitive candidate for nationwide leadership. He noted that Diem had support from the Catholic trade unions and the Trinh Minh. The faction of the Cao Dai, and in the coastal villages of Central Vietnam. If Diem could dispose of the French and Bao Dai and consolidate the military's support by adding 100,000 men to the Army, elections might become something "to be sought rather than a nightmare to be avoided."³⁰

But Diem's indifference to popularity and his hostility to compromise constantly hindered the development of a broad political constituency. Harwood found him "fixated" with the French, "obsessed" with their obstructionism, but totally unconcerned about establishing a base of voter support. His participation in later efforts to improve his public image was therefore more acquiescent than active. Even Nhu's relatively progressive views had the authoritarian, elitist cast of the early 20th century Vietnamese anticolonialists. Nevertheless, Nhu's request for Agency help in organizing a political party along democratic lines was no mere "window dressing." He seemed to Harwood genuinely to be groping for some way to bring the government into contact with the people.³¹

²⁸ FVSA 741, 30 July 1954, FVSA 746, 13 August 1954,

²⁹ FVSA 746, 13 August 1954,

³⁰ FVSA 746; Paul Harwood, interview by Thomas Ahern, McLean, VA, 11 September 1990,

³¹ Harwood interviews, 14 February and 11 September 1990; and 10 June 1964,

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Nhu's agreement to the conditions for CIA support specified by Harwood in May had left open the content and the nature of the Agency's participation. Nhu wrote to Harwood, apparently during these chaotic early weeks of Diem's administration, asking for support without Agency "controls." The Station acceded—

—and planning began for a variety of projects aimed at consolidating the government's control and building for it a base of popular support. These included the Can Lao (Labor) Party, to be developed out of Nhu's semicovert Parti Travailleiste cadre, and like its predecessor, intended to be a cadre party, not a mass organization. It would act for the new government where the bureaucratic legacy of the colonial regime was found inadequate, and would control the mass front organization, the National Revolutionary Movement, aimed at building a popular constituency for the Diem government.

The painfully slow progress of these efforts resulted, in the Station's view, from several causes. One of these was Nhu's propensity to take an idea for reality, or at least for something realizable. He was "always talking about things that didn't exist as if they did." Second, there was the perennial shortage of competent people. Throughout the Harwood-Nhu association, what seemed like sound ideas lay dormant for lack of effective leaders and functionaries to carry them out.³²

Another problem was the administrative vacuum in the countryside. Harwood heard it poignantly described by the capable but consumptive Tran Trung Dung, at the time Acting Defense Minister and also former mayor of Hanoi and husband of Nhu's niece. Harwood had traveled with members of the Nhu family by military convoy to Vinh Long, in the Mekong Delta. During the course of the visit, in a conversation with Dung, he inquired about the extent of the government's control. Harwood later paraphrased Dung's response: "As long as we're here it's this far, but when we go back to Saigon it

³² SAIG 3670, 23 August 1954, and FVSA 1542, 5 September 1955.

³³ Harwood interview, 11 September 1990.

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goes back with us." Harwood asked if there were "provincial officials, district administrators, people who take care of the roads, or anything else?" He recalled Dung's reply:

No, the French didn't leave us anything. ... Our problem right now is not trying to keep the Viet Minh from taking over our area, but to take it over before they do. ... [Of course,] we can't go about this thing in the same way [as the French] because this is our country, we can't operate as an army of occupation. But... trying to develop political and social programs with any impact... in an unadministered territory where you have a hostile population which is armed and ready to go against you—how do you do it?³⁴ []

Harwood had no answer to Dung's question. The issue was further complicated by the absence of a coherent, attractive political program designed to win mass support. As the "National Revolution" theme faded, Harwood and Nhu struggled to replace it with something vital enough to win over uncommitted nationalists and compete with the Viet Minh. But the discussion seems not to have transcended the level of organizational mechanics, and Station reporting concentrates on such things as the construction of a "Cold War political apparatus" and material support to Tran Quoc Buu.³⁵ []

The activism of CIA's officers in Saigon did not imply disagreement with the Embassy's pessimism. The regular Station took note of Diem's heavy reliance on family members, saying that he could not win "if nationwide elections were held tomorrow."³⁶ Diem had been Prime Minister just two weeks when a "despondent and fatigued" Nhu insisted to Harwood and Spence on 21 July that, despite the obstacles, his brother would remain in office and try to consolidate his government. Apparently speaking for both Nhu and himself, Harwood wrote that the "task is hopeless, but [the] effort must be made."³⁷ []

That effort included direct Station intervention in the formation of the Cabinet. Later in July, Harwood found himself back with the pistol-packing

³⁴ Harwood interview, [] 19 June 1964. The "armed" and "hostile population" presumably refers to the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects as well as to the Viet Minh. []

³⁵ FVSA 746, 13 August 1954, []

³⁶ FVSA 746, 13 August 1954, []

³⁷ SAIG 3407, 26 July 1954, [] Harwood interview, 10 June 1964, [] Both Harwood and Lansdale seemed more confident, in late July, of the prospects for a resistance movement in the North, about to be taken over by the Communists, than they were of Diem's prospects in Western-supported South Vietnam. Both of them bombarded Headquarters with demands for material support and training for stay-behind units to be organized by the old line nationalist parties, the Dai Viet and the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang. On this issue, in sharp contrast to their Saigon programs, the two Stations seem to have kept each other fully informed. []

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Nguyen Ton Hoan and "belabored [him] mercilessly into seeking an appointment with Ngo Dinh Nhu to negotiate Dai Viet support to the Diem government." Harwood then "turned around and sat down and beat Nhu just as hard to accept Dai Viet support." The two eventually met, but reached no agreement; Diem and Nhu never did enlist the support of the non-Communist nationalist factions.³⁸ [redacted]

Lansdale found Diem dispirited by the chaos that followed the close of the Geneva Conference on 21 July. He responded by trying to help Diem deal with the immediate threats to the government while laying the groundwork for the construction of permanent institutions.³⁹ Like Diem and Lansdale, Nhu and Harwood saw the sects and the French as posing the greatest danger. Harwood wrote on 13 July that prosecution of the war against the Viet Minh was impossible "when all tools needed to do this job [are] locked up by French high command." Having acknowledged the underlying Communist threat, he got down to the immediate problem: if the French continued to obstruct Diem's use of the Army to deal with the sects and the Binh Xuyen, they would provoke increasing Vietnamese hostility, not only to France, but eventually also to the US.⁴⁰ [redacted]

Ngô Đình Diệm vs. the French [redacted]

As the North prepared for Communist rule, Ngo Dinh Diem exercised undisputed control over the grounds of his combined office and residence and little else. The French High Commissioner still occupied Gia Long Palace. As we have seen, the French still ran the Army and controlled the country's finances. Their capacity to frustrate Diem's full exercise of the powers of his office rested not only on these residual controls but on collusion with various non-Communist organizations whose interests would suffer under an effective indigenous regime. [redacted]

Absentee Emperor Bao Dai, for example, had given the Saigon police and Sureté (the latter, the internal security branch) on a concessionary basis to an underworld gang called the Binh Xuyen. In the countryside the French were linked with two religious sects, the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, whose armies controlled substantial areas west of Saigon and in the lower Mekong Delta. Of potential adversaries only the Viet Minh were quiescent; in Diem's view the immediate threat to his political survival was not the Communists but the French and their collaborators. Lansdale, as we have seen, emphatically

³⁸ SAIG 3407, 26 July 1954, [redacted] Harwood interview, 10 June 1964, [redacted]

³⁹ Claudestine Service Historical Paper (CSHP) 113, *The Saigon Military Mission, June 1954 to December 1956*, 2 vols., October 1970, II, pp. 5-8. [redacted]

⁴⁰ SAIG 3332, 13 July 1954, [redacted]

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shared this perception, and Harwood held essentially the same view. Indeed he joined in a 20 July Lansdale appeal for covert support to Diem, which should continue whatever the final terms of the impending Geneva agreement, and even if the US gave such an agreement its formal endorsement.⁴¹ []

Headquarters apparently did not directly address the Harwood-Lansdale appeal for covert support to Diem, but did show itself more willing than the Department of State to challenge French control of key Vietnamese institutions. In late July, Richard Bissell, then a special assistant to the DCI, asked the State Department for confirmation of CIA authority to operate in Indochina independently of the French. Bissell later advised FE Division that State had confirmed its intention to support Diem. State's position was "emphatically not that [of allowing] the French to frustrate the development of independent national governments in the Associated States and to hold a veto power over US actions." But the Department had noted continuing French control of the "only instruments of power" in the South, and it concluded that "activities opposed by the French would probably fail."⁴² []

Bissell suggested that FE Division convey this view to the field and instruct the Stations to tell the French "something of what they are doing" when this could be done "without immediately prejudicing the success of an undertaking."⁴³ Whether this advice ever reached the field is not known. In practice, Lansdale's subsequent work with refugee transportation and his civic action project with the military were coordinated with the French; his other activity and Harwood's liaison with the Palace were not. But Lansdale's style reflected more his civilian experience in advertising than it did clandestine technique. His high profile contacts with Diem and various Vietnamese Army officers and sect leaders generated several French efforts, in both Saigon and Paris, to have him withdrawn.⁴⁴ []

The Dulles brothers were firmly committed to the Lansdale mission, and these efforts failed. The two Stations persevered, but in these early weeks encountered little except frustration. The combination of French and indigenous opposition, Diem's contempt for constituency-building, and the shortage of competent subordinates prevented the new government from creating visible political momentum. An impatient CIA Headquarters began to question whether Diem was, after all, the man for the job. Emmet McCarthy responded

⁴¹ Harwood interviews, 10 June 1964, [] and 25 October 1989; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, pp. 150, 171-172; SAIG 3366, 20 July 1954, []

⁴² [] Memorandum for C/FE, "Policy re Indochina," 30 July 1954, quoted in CSHF 113, I, pp. 30-32. []

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 32. []

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-118. []

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on 21 August, speaking for both his Station and Lansdale's. Rejecting the idea that Diem might be no more than a vacillating politician, McCarthy insisted that his "uncompromising stand on complete independence for Vietnam" underlay all his earlier dealings with the French and the Japanese as well as various Vietnamese factions. As for US criticism of Diem's failure to "demonstrate an administrative capacity such as no previous government has demonstrated," the COS noted that the French still ran Diem's "finances, military, customs, immigration, diplomatic representation, judiciary and police matters and security forces."⁴⁵

McCarthy went on to acknowledge the limited competence of the Cabinet, and the politicians and sect leaders not yet won over, but maintained that the largest obstacle to Diem's consolidation of power remained French efforts to undercut him. Sounding a note about Vietnamese leadership that would resonate through the rest of the Agency—and US—experience in Vietnam, McCarthy argued that there was no one else. As a "nationalist symbol and single-minded and courageous leader," Diem remained the best choice for US support.⁴⁶

It seems likely that McCarthy was right: if any non-Communist leader merited US support, it was Ngo Dinh Diem. At this point, as in the months leading up to Diem's selection by the US and France, this preference reflected the absence of an alternative as much as it did any display by Diem of either political charisma or administrative skill. But continuing French sabotage of Diem's efforts distracted US officials from the more basic question of his capacity, under any circumstances, to create a nation-state capable of resisting absorption by the Communist regime in Hanoi. In any case, as we have seen, the US decision to engage itself in Vietnam had from the beginning grown more out of the perceived cost of failure than out of confidence in victory. (U)

⁴⁵ SAIG 3650, 21 August 1954,

⁴⁶ Ibid.

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CHAPTER 4

Bringing the Armies to Heel

Agency defenders of Ngo Dinh Diem might see no alternative to him, but this did not mean that they failed to recognize his weaknesses. In a cable of 25 August, even Lansdale shed his customary optimism. Without explicitly repudiating his endorsement of McCarthy's 21 August defense of Diem, Lansdale suggested that the Prime Minister had waited too long to exhibit "real leadership." Unnamed nationalists outside the government were becoming restive at Diem's fumbling, and Diem would now have to act boldly in order to avoid a coup. Always confident of the power of the American political example, and of his own ability to impart that example to the foreign mind, Lansdale said he intended to work with these nationalists "and teach them some [of] our political principles." But he feared that this might not suffice to prevent a coup, and he was at the moment spreading the word that the US Government would spurn any new government "established by bloody coup." The question remained: If such a government were "anti-Communist and willing [to] accept guidance then what would US Government policy be?"¹

The feared coup did not take place, and Lansdale's question did not have to be answered. Instead, he and the regular Station continued the struggle to generate political support for the regime. Harwood and Nhu now came up with two devices aimed at compensating for the government's lack of control over the army and police. First, they proposed a combined mobile police force and presidential guard, intended as a kind of all-purpose security and investigative force to protect the regime from "commie [and] confessional [sect] agitators," and to strengthen Diem's hand in his dealings with other political groups.² Harwood made arrangements through and Nhu provided about 30 men for paramilitary training by the but the

¹ SAIG 3706, 25 August 1954,

² SAIG 3332, 13 July 1954 and SAIG 3670, 23 August 1954,

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project never matured. Harwood later called it a "fantasy," citing the lack of competent personnel and the unrealistically varied functions the organization was to perform.³

The other project was better focused and seemed to produce better results. It involved the support of a hamlet militia, originally created by the French to resist the Viet Minh, that Diem and Nhu wanted to use to establish Saigon's authority in the countryside. Harwood supplemented Nhu's support of the program by allowing him to use for it part of the Station subsidy that seems to have begun about August 1954. By the end of the year, the force had by Nhu's account some 15,000 men under arms. The government used it to stake out a rural claim not only—perhaps not primarily—against the Viet Minh, but also against the sects. Although the Station had no independent way to monitor results, Nhu's evident satisfaction indicated that it was serving its purpose.⁴

If Nhu was happy, COS McCarthy was not. On 17 September, he sent an angry cable asking Headquarters to instruct Lansdale to cease his meddling with the program. Seeking to head off any charge of poor coordination, McCarthy said Lansdale had been "generally" advised of the activity in August; the COS had informed him of it indirectly, via Lansdale's executive officer and interpreter, Joe Redick. The Headquarters response, if any, has not survived; there may already have been a disposition to let the two Stations work out their differences by themselves.⁵

Preparing for an Exodus from the North (U)

In any case, the plethora of challenges to Diem's fledgling government precluded either Station from dwelling on jurisdictional questions. One of these challenges followed from the Geneva Accord provision allowing relocation on political grounds. Both Vietnamese and US officials in Saigon expected a mass exodus of Catholics from the North, and within weeks of taking office Diem had set up an interministerial committee on refugees.⁶

But this group did nothing, and Lansdale, not yet firmly established in Diem's confidence, fumed in frustration until he persuaded Ambassador Heath to intercede with the Prime Minister. In mid-August, Diem replaced the first committee with a new one empowered, as Lansdale wanted, to negotiate transportation and other logistics with the Americans and the French.

³ Harwood interview, 16 May 1990.

⁴ Harwood interview, 16 May 1990. Harwood could not remember the amount of the subsidy, and it is not specified in surviving files.

⁵ SAIG 3956, 17 September 1954.

⁶ Clandestine Service Historical Paper (CSHP) 113, *The Saigon Military Mission, June 1954 to December 1956*, 2 vols., October 1970, II, pp. 6-7.

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Lansdale was delighted with Diem's appointment of Dr. Emmanuel Phuoc to run the office, but Phuoc proved to be no exception to the general run of early Diem subordinates. Within a month Lansdale had branded Phuoc a posturing self-seeker. But the mere formal existence of a Vietnamese executive authority enabled the Americans and the French to get on with transportation and reception arrangements.⁷



SMM's friend Ho Quan "Manny" Phuoc is an effervescent psywarrior. At this briefing in Long My, President Diem, Defense Minister Minh, and D legu  to the South Lam watch some of his mood (caption by Ed Lansdale).

Before the migration ended in May 1955, over 900,000 people moved to South Vietnam. Helping to stimulate this was the Northern element of Lansdale's team, which remained in Hanoi until 9 October 1954. Its primary mission was the conduct of stay-behind operations in the North, but Lansdale used it also for propaganda designed to encourage emigration. The team

⁷ SAIG 3607, 17 August 1954, and SAIG 3687, 24 August 1954, both Regarding the new refugee relocation agency, see SAIG 3607, 17 August 1954, *ibid.*

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propagated slogans, aimed at Catholic villages, such as "the Virgin Mary is going south," and put out leaflets, ostensibly of Viet Minh origin. Lansdale believed that one of these produced a threefold increase in refugee registration by provoking fear that the Viet Minh would confiscate private property.⁸

Lansdale later claimed to have alerted Diem to the electoral potential of a transplanted Catholic community and thus to have been instrumental in promoting the migration. But he also conceded that most of the Catholics needed no urging to leave the North. His major contribution had therefore less to do with psychological warfare than with his forceful advocacy of a transportation and resettlement program.⁹

Dividing the Sect Leadership

As August gave way to September 1954, the refugee program was just getting under way. The local French remained hostile to Diem, for whom the only real bright spot at this point was the susceptibility of the sect forces to accommodation with the new government. In an episode crucial to his survival in office, Diem moved with uncharacteristic decisiveness, exploiting both CIA Stations to win the formal allegiance of one sect leader and achieve at least a *modus vivendi* with two others. In this context, the sects themselves deserve a closer look.

The Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai arose as 20th century products of the social dislocations that accompanied colonial rule in the South. The Hoa Hao, with up to a million and a half adherents in the western part of the Mekong Delta, developed out of Buddhism. The somewhat larger Cao Dai borrowed from a number of the world's major religions; Victor Hugo and Abraham Lincoln were among its secular saints. Before World War II, both sects contested French authority in their respective enclaves, the Cao Dai northwest of Saigon and the Hoa Hao in the western Mekong Delta. During their occupation of Indochina in World War II, the Japanese supported the Cao Dai, competing for influence with the Vichy regime they left in nominal control until early 1945.¹⁰

⁸ Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: Unquiet American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. 158.

⁹ Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 166-167; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 222; CSHP 113, II, pp. 6-7. Lansdale told his biographer that he then pressed Heath into service as interpreter with Diem when the time came to persuade the Prime Minister to approve the new relocation scheme (Currey, *Lansdale*, pp. 156-157).

¹⁰ Currey, *Lansdale*, pp. 145-146.

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The two sects were militantly anti-Communist. After the war the French chose to overlook any wartime inconstancy in order to enlist their support against the Viet Minh. In this context, they undertook the financial and logistical maintenance of sect forces—an estimated 15,000 Hoa Hao and perhaps 20,000 Cao Dai—as auxiliaries to the French Expeditionary Corps.¹¹ After Dien Bien Phu, with Saigon's treasury still under their control, local French authorities continued courting the two sects, hoping to salvage some influence at the expense of the francophobe Diem. But they could make no enduring commitments and failed, if they were seriously trying, to drive the sects onto the offensive against the new government. It is nevertheless clear that most of the sect forces and many Vietnamese Army officers were hostile to Diem. Any sect forces that he could co-opt would weaken opposition from that quarter and help deter dissidents in the Army.¹² []

Hoa Hao and Cao Dai leaders, for their part, faced the loss of their French subsidies and were looking for some other means of support. This provided the basis for some mutual accommodation, if Diem could replace the French as benefactor of the sects. But he had no money. Nhu had already complained to Harwood that his brother's predecessor, Prince Buu Loc, had absconded with the Prime Minister's confidential fund when he left office. Accordingly, sometime in the first weeks of the Diem government, Harwood sent [] [] piasters to the Palace for use at Diem's discretion. How much of this first subsidy Diem spent on the sects is unknown, but it was presumably exhausted when he approached Lansdale in September 1954 with a request for more.¹³ []

The commander of an independent Cao Dai force, Trinh Minh The, was a longtime contact of Ngo Dinh Nhu. More anti-French than pro-Diem (the French believed he had assassinated their commanding general in the South in 1950), General The was nevertheless a potential ally against pro-French elements in the regular army. After negotiations between The and Nhu, Diem asked Lansdale for funds with which to buy The's support. Lansdale delivered [] in greenbacks to Diem, who passed the money on to Nhu for delivery to The. Two days later, on 15 September, Lansdale was invited to The's headquarters on the Cao Dai's sacred mountain in Tay Ninh Province. There,

¹¹ Ibid. Estimates of sect membership are from Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 116. []

¹² CSHP 113, II, p. 10. []

¹³ Harwood interview, 21 June 1990. The money was written off on the basis of a hand receipt from a Palace functionary, []

[] Harwood could not recall the exact amount, but thought it might have been the equivalent []

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Cao Dai temple at Tay Ninh (photo courtesy of Paul Harwood).

General The confirmed his support for the government, agreed not to take any uncoordinated military initiative against the French, and released his French prisoners.¹⁴ [redacted]



First meeting with Trinh Minh The in his Nui Ba Den hideout. Lansdale at left, Trinh Minh The is facing camera (caption by Ed Lansdale).

The account of this incident in Lansdale's official report omits his own role in securing The's commitment to Diem. Reflecting his perennial reluctance to acknowledge using material inducements, Lansdale says only that "at Ambassador Heath's request, the US secretly furnished Diem with funds for The, through the SMM" (Saigon Military Mission). Inasmuch as The's adherence

¹⁴ CSHP 113, I, p. 69; CSHP 113, II, p. 10; Harwood interview, 21 June 1990; [redacted] Memorandum for the Record, "Transfer of CIA Funds to Colonel Trinh Minh The by Lansdale," n.d. [redacted]

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was already assured with the passage of funds, the invitation to Lansdale seems likely to have represented Diem's way of securing a display of overt US recognition of The, whom the French regarded as a common criminal.¹⁵

This episode provoked the first recorded instance of what developed into chronic antagonism between Lansdale and Nhu. At a subsequent meeting with Harwood, Nhu blamed Lansdale for provoking Trinh Minh The's accusation that payment in dollars showed Diem to be in the pocket of the Americans. Probably embarrassed at having been an accessory to this, Nhu threatened to have Lansdale declared persona non grata. And Lansdale returned the sentiment. Once, after Ambassador Heath's departure in November, he instructed Joe Redick to see the new Ambassador, General Collins, and suggest having Nhu removed. Redick reminded him that Nhu was the regular Station's principal contact in the government, and Lansdale dropped the matter.¹⁶

A Test of CIA Leverage

Agency support for Diem's efforts with the sects did not prevent a US confrontation with him the week after General The rallied. Diem's Cabinet was composed entirely of Ngo family loyalists, and the French had just persuaded Secretary of State Dulles that it should be broadened to include representatives of the still-uncommitted sects. Diem resisted the combined French and American diplomatic efforts, and Headquarters finally instructed the Station to try to break the impasse, in order to avoid confronting him with the possible withdrawal of American support. Harwood doubted both the wisdom of the goal and the existence of a workable alternative to Diem but set out to do what he was told.¹⁷

It appears that Nhu undertook first to try his own hand at talking Diem into making the desired changes. But on 20 September he acknowledged his failure with a message urgently requesting Harwood to come to the Palace that evening to argue the case himself. The three met in Diem's bedroom. As Harwood later recalled it, "I really had the heat on, and argued, pressured," but Diem was obdurate, despite a Harwood threat to withdraw from the relationship in the face of Diem's "passivity." Harwood was equally obdurate, and at one point they sat in silence for something like an hour and a half. As the night wore on, they also walked out onto the balcony at the front of Gia Long Palace, and Harwood noticed two tanks outside the fence with their guns trained

¹⁵ CSHP 113, II, p. 10.

¹⁶ Harwood interviews, 17 October 1989 and 14 August 1990; Redick interview, 28 September 1989. Harwood had no recollection of telling Lansdale of The's negotiations with Nhu, and thought Lansdale might well have seen his own role as operative in rallying The to the government.

¹⁷ Harwood interviews, 10 June 1964, and 16 May and 11 September 1990.

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on the Palace. Well aware of the doubtful loyalty of the Army's Chief of Staff, he suggested that Diem's presence on the balcony might tempt General Hinh's gunners, and they went back inside. Finally, Diem grunted something which Nhu interpreted for Harwood as meaning that he was giving in, the Cabinet would be broadened.¹⁸ []

And Diem did broaden it, although in Harwood's view, the results vindicated the Prime Minister's reluctance: the new Hoa Hao and Cao Dai ministers were corrupt and disloyal. Lansdale was frantic, persuaded that the Cabinet moves reflected nothing but a treacherous French move to promote anarchy. He implored DCI Dulles to stiffen Emperor Bao Dai's resistance to French maneuvering, and to get him to rescind his reported decision to ask for Diem's resignation.¹⁹ []

However unsatisfactory the outcome, the incident does suggest the predominant Agency influence in American dealings with Diem and Nhu in the early months of the regime. Ten years later, Harwood recalled the episode as representing perhaps "the first and last time that anybody ever got Diem to do something...that he didn't want to do to start with."²⁰ Harwood may have overstated his conclusion, but it illustrates how little, even during the period of Diem's greatest dependence, US support could be translated into influence. The question of leverage, so vigorously argued in later years, had been essentially answered before the end of 1954. []

Warding Off an Army Mutiny []

In the tangled aftermath of the Cabinet reshuffle, the loyalty of the French-dominated military remained in doubt. The government's writ did not extend, for example, to the psychological warfare branch of its own army. Fed by a French journalist, the Army's radio had in September "undertaken a character assassination" of Diem, which Lansdale believed attracted a large audience. To combat this, he arranged the loan of a US Navy officer from the task force then transporting refugees and placed him at the radio station, whose Vietnamese commander had been his classmate and friend at the US Army's Psychological Warfare School at Fort Bragg. The idea was gradually to modify the editorial slant from anti-Diem to anti-Viet Minh without attracting the attention of the French. The young American lieutenant worked hard, "with partial success."²¹ []

¹⁸ FVSA 810, 27 September 1954, [] interviews with Paul Harwood on 10 June 1964, [] 17 and 26 October 1989 and 16 May 1990. []

¹⁹ Harwood interview, 10 June 1964, [] SAIG 4021 and SAIG 4039, 23 September 1954, []

²⁰ Harwood interview, 10 June 1964, []

²¹ CSHP 113, II, pp. 13-14; SAIG 4293, 18 October 1954, []

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The regular CIA Station came up with a radio of its own, loaning Nhu a transmitter borrowed from the MAAG. Nhu used it for the next several weeks to proselytize army officers and to announce new adherents—some authentic, some notional—to Diem's cause.²²

French influence over the Vietnamese military was abetted by the Army's commander, General Nguyen Van Hinh. A French citizen and officer in the French Air Force, Hinh did not conceal his distaste for his nominal superior, the Prime Minister, and seems to have made thinly veiled threats to help unseat him. But Hinh recognized the intensity of the US commitment to Diem, and in early October made a conciliatory overture to Lansdale, who admonished him through Filipino and Vietnamese intermediaries to get on the government bandwagon and start preparing to fight the Communists.²³

Still fearful that Hinh intended to depose Diem, Lansdale urged Heath and Major General John O'Daniel, USA, chief of the MAAG, to deploy the Saigon Military Mission (SMM) where it could exercise continuous influence on the Army. Diem had already endorsed Lansdale's liaison with the civilian agencies responsible for rural affairs, and Lansdale brought them together with their US counterparts at his house on 7 October. Heath now agreed to assign Lansdale's men to General Hinh to coordinate the military aspects of this rural civic action, and simultaneously to help prevent a rupture between Diem and the Army.²⁴

On 11 October, Lansdale reported that Diem wanted him assigned as Hinh's personal advisor. Ambassador Heath backed away from this idea, but Lansdale persisted in his self-assigned role as mediator and on the 18th triumphantly announced to CIA Headquarters that Diem and Hinh had accepted him as peacemaker between them. Three days later, Lansdale got word that Hinh had provisionally renounced his opposition to the government. But before declaring loyalty, Hinh would require that Diem demonstrate the good faith of which Lansdale had assured him. Meanwhile, Lansdale had just

²² Harwood interview, 10 June 1964,

²³ SAIG 4197, 8 October 1954,

²⁴ Ibid. Lansdale ended his report of this episode in the grandiloquent fashion characteristic of his early correspondence from Saigon: "If present plans mature the SMM [will] be in position [to] change [the] Indochina picture rapidly." He begged for more and better people—only two of the existing complement could be trusted to "work without constant supervision"—to enable him to seize this "big chance [for] CIA [to] play heroic role save SEAsia right where situation most desperate."

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"scolded" Hinh's chief of psychological warfare for his dealings with the anti-Diem leader of a Hoa Hao force. The colonel, who Lansdale believed was also a French agent, "grinned and promised [to be a] good boy" in the future.²⁵



Watching First Paywar Company ceremonies in the rain are Generals Hinh and Ty with SMM members Lansdale, Sharpi, and Redick. In the background are our USIS friend Jack Andrew (died of hepatitis), Swiss journalist Peter Schmidt, and Capt Giai (reportedly murdered by Ba Cut) (caption by Ed Lansdale).

Whether Diem condescended to prove his good faith to General Hinh is not recorded. But an Army mutiny was now at least temporarily defused, and General Trinh Minh The picked the same moment to confirm his adherence to the Diem cause. He told Lansdale he was trying to get another Cao Dai general to reject a Hinh offer of 6,000 rifles in return for Cao Dai repudiation of the Diem government. Diem now invited Lansdale to call on him, and Lansdale, in this heady atmosphere, told Headquarters he proposed to get Diem finally to "act like [a] leader and ask people [to] unite against [the] Communists while building [a] free strong nation." In an effusion of compressed telegraphese, Lansdale acknowledged that his Station might be embarked on a quixotic mission. But:

Vietnamese use grenades instead windmills. Part job is make them stop trying kill each other particularly when we guests their houses. Some local US Government officials feel we too naive but our love

²⁵ SAIG 4293; SAIG 4337, 22 October 1954,

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campaign started work despite long odds against. If win then US Government has friendly united govt army people in fight against communists.²⁶

Prime Minister Diem vs. Ambassador Heath

But Lansdale's activist optimism collided that night (21 October) with Diem's fatalistic passivity. To Lansdale's every urging that he rally his population and start building the institutions of government, Diem pleaded weakness: the French were supporting his enemies and planning to bomb Trinh Minh The's forces; even the Americans insisted on Cabinet representation for the treacherous sects. Lansdale reported that he offered detailed suggestions for solving Diem's litany of problems, but the Prime Minister thought himself too weak to tackle any of them except by "devious methods." Lansdale then tried explaining the notions of executive efficiency and delegation of authority, but Diem looked unconvinced. Lansdale concluded his crestfallen account of this session with a resigned if somewhat patronizing sigh: "Well, I] am also unsuccessful getting my sons [to] wash behind [the] ears."²⁷

A week before the disappointing 21 October meeting, a "bitterly discouraged" Diem had already displayed to Lansdale his sense of dependence on foreign sympathy and support. He gave Lansdale a long message for President Eisenhower in which he complained that Ambassador Heath's complicity in French maneuvering utterly vitiated his own efforts to energize the struggle against the Communists. He wanted American material support delivered directly, not through the French, and American advisors to modernize the government and the Army. And were Heath to be replaced, his successor should be an American of "great courage and irresistible conviction" of his country's ideals. Heath seemed, unfortunately, "to see our problems from the French perspective."²⁸

Relying this message to Washington, Lansdale assured Dulles of his personal regard for Heath, and suggested that the DCI delete Diem's unflattering description of the Ambassador before sharing the message with the State Department. But Lansdale thought the DCI should take up the matter privately with the Secretary of State, because it would be "constructive [to] replace Heath soonest," so long as his replacement was "out of top drawer. Urgently need man caliber Clay or Van Fleet even if could have only for year."²⁹

²⁶ SAIG 4337, *ibid.*

²⁷ SAIG 4345, 24 October 1954, *ibid.*

²⁸ SAIG 4291, 18 October 1954, *ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

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Two days later, on 20 October, Dulles assured Lansdale he had done as requested: he had discussed the message informally at the "top policy level at the Department of State," presumably with his brother. But he noted the "most unfortunate consequences" for CIA relations with State both in the field and in Washington if the Agency became the channel for such communications. The US Government could not, in any case, act on such an informal request as Diem's through Lansdale, and Diem should be advised that Eisenhower would not see it. Dulles added that he understood Lansdale's actions as an intelligence officer in "acquainting" him with Diem's message. Nevertheless, he fully agreed with State's procedural objections. Lansdale "should make it clear to Diem that this is a procedural matter and in no way signifies any diminution of US Government support of him."³⁰ []

The irrepensible Lansdale shot back: "Roger wilco." He had, he said, stipulated his respect for protocol in his first message and now felt that the DCI might "wish to point out informally [to the] State Department some time that CIA was not willfully interjecting itself into State Department business." This had come about only because Diem could not use the State channel, distrusted his own Ambassador to Washington, and had no other reliable emissary for what he considered an emergency message. Lansdale implied that these circumstances left him no choice, as "US Government policy was [and] is that Diem is a friend we help."³¹ []

A Conflict of Operating Philosophies []

With the question of Vietnamese Army loyalty still simmering, and Diem still fixated on his problems, Lansdale lost another skirmish in October 1954. This one, waged against the regular Station ostensibly over an officer's assignment, revealed the gulf that separated the Lansdale operational approach to operational security from that of the CIA's Directorate of Plans. []

The object of the battle was the same Ed Korn who had served as [] [] case officer a couple of years earlier. Lansdale wanted him for his psychological warfare program, but the regular Station objected. Korn had served with the regular Station at the Embassy during that tour and had been known [] as CIA. His return now with SMM, the Station argued, would destroy the credibility of repeated claims by both stations that Lansdale represented not CIA but the US military. After 10 days of sometimes bitter correspon-

³⁰ [] 20 October 1954, ibid []

³¹ SAJG 4375, 25 October 1954, ibid []

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dence, Lansdale essentially conceded, accepting that Korn would have to work at the Embassy with Lansdale's role limited to "remote guidance and protection."³²

Lansdale took the occasion of this quarrel to call on Allen Dulles to redefine the term "covert." Attributing to the Communists a capacity for assuming "open ideological leadership while quietly building covert ops," he criticized the US failure to adopt a similarly open stance. The insistence on secrecy, he thought, put the US Government in the "false position [of] being afraid or ashamed of its beliefs. ... We require natives [to] risk [their] lives while we seemingly hide." Lansdale said he wanted at least to have open liaison between the SMM and the regular Station: the "need for meticulous [clandestine] methods... has been [a] dead issue since [the] Geneva Conference." The different values they attached to concealing US sponsorship of "covert" action programs remained a bone of contention between Lansdale and the Agency for the duration of Lansdale's tour.³³

Exit General Hinh, Enter the Filipinos

The conclusion of these episodes brought no general relaxation, as they were followed by renewed tension between General Hinh and Prime Minister Diem. Lansdale later reported, without identifying his source, of learning that Hinh planned to attack the Palace on 26 October. He thought to divert Hinh by luring him and his two most trusted staff officers to a holiday in Manila. Hinh declined, but three of his staff, including the alleged French agent commanding the psychological warfare unit, accepted. Lansdale sent them off in an aircraft loaned him by General O'Daniel. On the effect of this ploy, Lansdale reported that "26 October was spent in the Philippines. The attack on the Palace didn't come off."³⁴

In retrospect, General Hinh's anti-Diem posturing looks like a French ploy to intimidate Diem into either cooperating or resigning, and Hinh's departure for exile in Paris in November suggests French acknowledgement of failure. Both Hinh and his French sponsors were surely aware that Senator Mansfield had threatened on 15 October to push for a suspension of aid to Vietnam and French forces there if Diem should be overthrown. And President Eisenhower released a letter to President Diem on 24 October promising that beginning on 1 January 1955 all US aid would flow directly to Diem's government. In this context, the seduction of Hinh's staff officers acquires an almost farcical

³² SAIG 4292, 18 October 1954, *ibid.* The assignment never materialized.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ CSHP 113, II, pp. 9-10, 15.

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Drama during Diem-Hinh struggles. Diem and power-seekers Binh Xuyen's Bay Vien, ex-President General Xuan, Chief of Staff General Hinh (caption by Ed Lansdale).

aspect. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of crisis that provoked it illustrated the preoccupation of the US Mission with the regime's fragility.³⁵

The Hinh episode did not shake Lansdale's faith in his own ability to inspire and control a unified Southern resistance to Communist expansion. His station, he told Headquarters on 1 November, intended to "influence millions rather than hundreds or thousands." It could do so, he implied in his characteristic telegraphese, because "overwhelming majority Vietnamese feel much same towards Vietminh and personal freedom as US Government does and voluntarily join us fight against enemy." To Lansdale, most of the sect leaders were true nationalists and militant anti-Communists; only the French stood in the way of a "national effort...coordinated under a national leader who [is] influenced or controlled by CIA."³⁶

Again, Lansdale's pursuit of grand objectives had to give way to the demands of unfolding events. This time, the challenge arose from the need to assert government control in areas being vacated by the Viet Minh. While nearly a million refugees were flowing into South Vietnam, an estimated

³⁵ Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 2 vols. (New York: Praeger, 1967), II, p. 864.

³⁶ SAIG 4444, 1 November 1954, and [redacted] both [redacted] [redacted] Lansdale never saw any contradiction in the notion of an authentically nationalist leader being controlled by the CIA. This derived, it seems, from an implicit assumption that true, i.e., anti-Communist, nationalists could have no interests that did not coincide with those of the United States.

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General Hinh makes Hoa Hao rebel Ba Cut a National Army colonel during the Diem-Hinh struggle (caption by Ed Lansdale). □

80,000 to 90,000 Viet Minh were headed north. An unknown number of cadres was left behind, but the Viet Minh administrative apparatus that had controlled substantial areas in the South was largely if provisionally dissolved. Prime Minister Diem now had to replace that apparatus with his own. Things were not much different even where the Viet Minh had not set up a formal administration of their own, as only about 20 percent of the colonial bureaucracy resided outside Saigon, with nearly all of that in the provincial capitals.³⁷ □

³⁷ Edward G. Lansdale, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Special Operations, Memorandum for the Record, "Pacification' in Vietnam," 16 July 1958, cited in CSHP 113, I, p. 146. The estimate of 10,000 cadres left in the South used by many authorities is apparently derived from French sources. If this refers only to Communist Party members, it may well be too large. If it includes non-Communists who joined the Viet Minh to fight the French, it is probably far too small. The figures later released by Diem's Information Ministry, however inflated, suggest that Saigon shared the perception of a larger Viet Minh presence after regroupment. □

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Upon his arrival in Saigon, Lansdale had immediately recognized the political no-man's land in the countryside. He had brought with him a belief, formed in the Philippines, in the efficacy of humanitarian programs as a means of strengthening the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the rural population. Accordingly, even before Diem's installation in office, he discussed with one of his Filipino contacts, Oscar Arellano, the formation of a volunteer medical team from the Philippines. As early as July, when the officers assigned to his Station were just beginning to trickle into Saigon, Lansdale began working with the Ministry of Social Action, helping to develop village-level self-help projects and a system of symbols that would allow illiterate voters to cast ballots in local elections.³⁸

The imminent arrival of refugees from the North and the corresponding evacuation of Viet Minh areas in the South demanded a response from Saigon. Having already secured encouragement from Arellano and the promise of financial support from CIA Headquarters, Lansdale was ready when Diem recognized the need for refugee medical assistance. He got Diem to issue a formal request for help, and Arellano, as Vice-President for Southeast Asia of the Junior Chamber of Commerce International, arranged sponsorship by the Philippine chapter. The result was Operation Brotherhood, whose first medical team arrived in Saigon in October 1954. By May 1955 it had over 100 doctors and nurses at 10 medical centers in South Vietnam, treating refugees and training Vietnamese medical personnel.³⁹

Lansdale believed that the Filipinos had much to offer Vietnam. He saw their contribution not solely or even primarily in terms of technical assistance, as in Operation Brotherhood or the later creation of a veterans' organization, but in the force of their example as citizens of a working democracy. Diem, however, accepted the technical help without ever adopting the Philippines as a political model for Vietnam. This produced some tension with Lansdale, who noted that once, "with a grimace on his face, Diem told me that the Vietnamese didn't need the help of a bunch of orators and nightclub musicians."⁴⁰ The subject came up with the regular Station, as well. Paul Harwood recalled a meeting with Diem and Nhu at which Diem made an incomprehensible but clearly derogatory remark about "*chemises flottantes*" (floating shirts). Nhu explained it as a reference to the loose-fitting barong worn by Lansdale's Filipinos.⁴¹

³⁸ CSHP 113, II, p. 13.

³⁹ Ibid., I, pp. 138-146.

⁴⁰ Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, p. 214.

⁴¹ Harwood interview, 17 October 1989.

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President Diem at Operation Brotherhood Clinic, c. 1955.



Town of Long Kuyan, center of pro-government Hoa Hao Army, turning out to welcome Operation Brotherhood. Note sign "Phi Luat Tuan," which means "Philippines" in Vietnamese (captions by Ed Lansdale).

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Operation Brotherhood open its Camau clinic on packing crates in front of the schoolhouse it later occupied, as national security troops rolled in for "Operation Liberty." These Filipinos kept the clinic open 24 hours a day (caption by Ed Lansdale).

The Continuing Controversy Over Ngo Dinh Nhu

Ngo Dinh Nhu's service as intermediary with Diem and his cooperation in various operational activities had established his value to the regular Station well before Diem accepted Ed Lansdale as an informal advisor. The Embassy, taking its cue from the French, regarded Nhu much as Lansdale did, seeing him as a malign influence on the Prime Minister. Thinking Diem would be more tractable in his brother's absence, Ambassador Heath tasked the Station in the fall of 1954 to get Nhu out of the country. The Station objected to this

Harwood went further, with McCarthy's approval, and "laid down the law to Nhu that he was not going to

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leave the country." Diem had already yielded to Heath, promising to send Nhu to a UNESCO conference in Montevideo, but Nhu stayed.⁴² []

Although not privy to this defiance, the Embassy was fully aware of the Station's increasing operational intimacy with Nhu, and this served, according to Paul Harwood, as "grounds for charges of a CIA cabal against official policy." The tension persisted through the tenures of both Ambassador Heath and General J. Lawton Collins, who replaced Heath in November 1954, and abated only with the arrival of Ambassador G. Frederick Reinhardt in May 1955.⁴³ []

Diem and Nhu, for their part, valued their Agency contacts (even when, as in Lansdale's case, the CIA connection was not acknowledged) as a way around the Embassy's reserve. Harwood wrote that he thought it "highly likely" that Nhu believed their liaison produced a Washington climate more favorable to Diem than would otherwise have been the case. Further cementing the connection, as we have already seen, was the Agency's bankrolling of Diem's maneuvers to divide and suborn his adversaries in the sects.⁴⁴ []

As a military man, Collins took a personal interest in the Vietnamese military establishment. He had little sympathy for irregular units, and not long after his arrival he instructed Harwood to tell Diem to terminate the hamlet militia project funded through Ngo Dinh Nhu. Reminded that the US could not force its will on the Prime Minister, Collins modified his order: it was Station support that would cease. Harwood later recalled that Collins, though always prepared to hear opposing views, was at the time preoccupied with the development of triangular divisions to defend against invasion across the 17th parallel. He was unimpressed by Harwood's argument that Viet Minh subversion already threatened the South from within.⁴⁵ []

⁴² Harwood interview, [] Another Nhu critic was the columnist Joseph Alsop, who told Lansdale in late November that he thought Nhu a "wretched little man." Lansdale responded with praises of Diem, which Alsop "seemed [to] buy." Lansdale reported this exchange in the same cable which asked Headquarters to approve Alsop's request for an "L [lethal] tablet" (apparently then on hand in Saigon) to take with him to Camau, a Communist redoubt where he was to see Viet Minh returnees being regrouped for movement north. Alsop apparently thought himself a candidate for abduction by the Communists, but Headquarters instructed Lansdale to deny the request as contrary to CIA regulations. SAIG 4802, 3 December 1954, and [] 5 December 1954, []

⁴³ Harwood interview, [] 10 June 1964; FVSA 1542, 9 September 1955, [] It appears that Ambassadors Heath and Collins, with their tepid support of Ngo Dinh Diem, were farther out of step with policy than the Saigon CIA representation. The atmosphere changed with Ambassador Reinhardt, who was concerned both to establish a personal working relationship with Diem and to support grassroots political organizing in South Vietnam. He seems to have valued the Agency as a participant in these endeavors. []

⁴⁴ FVSA 1542, 5 September 1955, []

⁴⁵ Harwood interview, 17 October 1989; Paul Harwood, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, tape recording, McLean, VA, 14 August 1990, copy in CIA History Staff. []

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Despite this setback, CIA became involved in other military questions. In late 1954, for example, Headquarters suggested that Diem proceed to integrate sect forces into a national guard subordinated to the Interior Ministry and grant the sects administrative authority in their own strongholds. A handwritten addendum instructed the field to obtain policy approval from the Embassy, and the cable was released by the Acting Chief of FE Division. McCarthy replied from Saigon that General Collins was opposed to the national guard idea, preferring to make the Army responsible for internal security. The debate continued, and Collins was eventually won over to a program that included an internal security role for the Interior Ministry and a training and advisory role for CIA.⁴⁶

A Dual Role for CIA

By the end of 1954, a pattern had emerged in CIA's dealing with Diem and Nhu that would prevail until the US decision to abandon them in 1963. The first strand in this pattern resulted from the fragility of the regime. For CIA, as well as for Diem and Nhu, defense against the regime's enemies claimed first priority. It is indeed likely that without CIA intervention on his behalf Diem would not have survived six months in office. Only the Agency had the means and displayed the will to bolster his resistance to the opposition, both active and passive, led or tolerated by the French. It is clear that Diem still saw himself as dependent for his survival on American backing, which in the context of immediate threats to his tenure came almost exclusively from CIA.

The second strand arose from the recognition by both Harwood and Lansdale—Nhu seems to have shared their view, at least in the beginning—that the government required a positive political program if it were ever to evolve into a durable alternative to the Viet Minh. Firefighting was thus interspersed with efforts to construct such a program and the apparatus with which to carry it out.

Behind these two strands, the background to the pattern was formed by Diem's indifference, even hostility, to political accommodation and the construction of a base of popular electoral support. Within weeks of his inauguration, CIA in Saigon had discovered that Diem was nearly as intractable as his problems. Although the Agency was determined to help him seize the political offensive, opportunities to do so were limited by his authoritarian mindset and by the continuing series of challenges to his political survival.

⁴⁶ SAIG 4246, 13 October 1954; 20 October 1954; 16 November 1954; SAIG 4662, 20 November 1954, all No evidence has been found that the Station resumed an active role in the funding of either sect forces or local self-defense units.

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The ability of CIA to exploit any such opportunities was restricted, furthermore, by a certain naiveté, especially on the part of Ed Lansdale. Lansdale had an abiding faith in anti-Communist fervor and American political institutions as a formula for political development in former colonies such as the Philippines and Vietnam. He ignored or denied the influence of cultural differences and social and economic structures; it is typical of his style that he never learned a foreign language. In his dealings with ex-colonials, he exuded a somewhat paternalistic benevolence that appealed to those who either shared his perception of American entitlement to leadership, or found it expedient to profess such views in return for promises of support against their local adversaries.⁴⁷

But the regular Station, also, found itself embroiled in efforts at institution-building which were driven more by reluctance to admit defeat than by rigorous calculation of the means appropriate to predictably achievable ends. At the end of 1954, both Stations had accomplished far more at defending Diem from his enemies than they had at influencing his governing style or policy decisions.

⁴⁷ Lansdale's *In the Midst of Wars* is replete with examples of his approach to his clients, and there are others in Currey, *Lansdale*.

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~~SECRET//X1~~**CHAPTER 5***Rural Pacification and the Sect Crisis*

At the beginning of 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu had exploited the help of their respective CIA advisors to defeat the first challenges to the new Prime Minister's authority. But new challenges were already clearing the horizon, notably a threatened insurrection by the religious sects and the urgent need to establish a government presence in the countryside. US officials doubtful of Diem's abilities continued to see little reason for an all-out effort on his behalf; the new Ambassador, J. Lawton Collins, was the most prominent among many such skeptics. In these circumstances, the informal CIA liaison with the two major figures in Diem's government had already evolved into the principal channel of communication between the Vietnamese regime and official Washington.

It seems clear that for Diem the value of his CIA liaison lay in its supporting him against local opposition and its service as a channel to get the regime's point of view to official Washington. For Washington, the intelligence product of the contacts with Diem and Nhu constituted the most authoritative and comprehensive coverage of the government's activities and intentions that it could get. With Harwood and Lansdale in privileged positions, conventional collection activity, whether unilateral or through liaison, took a back seat. But Diem and Nhu had—or at least were sharing—very little credible information on the DRV. In the interval between crises, COS McCarthy moved to get the Vietnamese to set up a foreign collection service targeted at the North.

Early Efforts to Build an Intelligence Liaison

McCarthy apparently felt obliged to approach the Vietnamese through the Ambassador rather than use the Harwood channel to Nhu. Heath was characteristically detached, telling the Station in early November 1954 that "it remained unclear how far 'we' were prepared to go...in supporting the Diem government and that we might discuss it later." Paul Harwood tried to help, encouraging Diem to request help from the Ambassador. But when Diem told

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Heath he wanted to send someone to the Embassy to discuss intelligence matters, the Ambassador understood him merely to be offering another source for debriefing.¹

The misunderstanding was finally resolved, but Diem was still undecided where to locate a new service; as late as March 1955, he was wondering aloud in Lansdale's company whether a new intelligence service should reside in the Defense Ministry or the Army. With his characteristic concern for personal control, he chose neither. Instead, the intelligence section of Nhu's Can Lao Party, the Political and Social Studies Service known by its French acronym SEPES, became the locus of the collection effort aimed at North Vietnam.

[Redacted]

St. George saw some promise in the enterprise. Although the chief of SEPES, Nhu loyalist Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, had no intelligence or security experience, his deputy, whose name St. George recalled as Diep, was a capable and energetic ex-Viet Minh who seemed prepared to accept a collegial relationship with his CIA counterparts. With Agency help, he began working to identify potential stay-behind agents already in the North and people in the South who might return to Hanoi as ostensible defectors.³ [Redacted]

Vigorous CIA support for Ngo Dinh Diem had in St. George's view overcome much of the initial Vietnamese reserve, and he anticipated fruitful cooperation from Diep and his other SEPES contacts. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

Nevertheless, Diem continued to depend on CIA for intelligence support, and the Agency continued trying to build and exploit a GVN collection capability. Under the French regime, the intelligence aspect of internal security had been located in the branch of the police called the Sureté. Renamed the Police

¹ FVSA 894, 3 December 1954, [Redacted]

² Clandestine Service Historical Paper (CSHP) 62, "The Defeat of the Binh Xuyen Sect by the Diem Government, 10 March-3 April 1955," 15 April 1955, p. 5, copy in CIA History Staff; Laurent St. George, telephone interview by Thomas L. Ahern, Camden, SC, 25 August 1995. St. George served in Saigon from mid-1953 to mid-1955. [Redacted]

³ St. George interview, 25 August 1995. [Redacted]

⁴ Ibid. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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Special Branch (PSB), it maintained the files on Communist as well as other subversives [redacted] and the Agency chose it as the locus of an effort at joint coverage of the Viet Cong.⁵ [redacted]

[redacted]

In intelligence liaison as in everything else, the sense of urgency generated by the weakness of the early Diem government demanded creative solutions when normal procedures could not promise immediate results. The regular Station lacked personnel to exploit apparent PSB receptivity to a collaborative effort, but COS McCarthy could find no place [redacted] to cover new officers. So Headquarters approached [redacted]

[redacted] Agency officers were dispatched under this arrangement, and arrived in Saigon in mid-1955. Such expedients did not, unfortunately, guarantee results, and when St. George left in late summer there had been no visible progress.⁷ [redacted]

Military Civic Action in the Viet Minh Zones [redacted]

However important for the long term, the question of creating a South Vietnamese intelligence capability paled before the continuous crisis of governmental authority. In late 1954, therefore, Ed Lansdale and Paul Harwood were devoting most of their attention to the threats to Diem's survival. The Prime Minister's distaste for political coalition-building had eroded the regular Station's early hopes that he might emerge as political competition for Ho Chi Minh, and the "National Revolution" theme gradually faded from Harwood's reporting after September 1954. Although there are later references to the elections scheduled for July 1956, both Harwood and Lansdale began to focus their efforts on the creation of popular support for Diem south of the 17th parallel. Harwood's organizational program with Nhu quickly collided, as we

⁵ Ibid. [redacted]

⁶ [redacted]

⁷ Ibid. [redacted]

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have seen, with the desperate shortage of competent people. The absence of an attractive ideology or positive program seems also to have stood in the way of creating a credible alternative to Ho Chi Minh.

Lansdale had at least the Army to work with. At the end of 1954, having observed the near-absence of a civilian governmental apparatus in the countryside, he persuaded Diem and the new ambassador, General Collins, to use the Army as the government's main tool for rural pacification. In early November, Lansdale's men had seen the promising civic action work initiated by a Vietnamese Army commander in the Mekong Delta near Soc Trang, and Lansdale induced Diem to visit the area.⁸ Diem was impressed and subsequently accepted Lansdale's proposal to give the Army both military and civil powers in the Viet Minh zones scheduled for reoccupation under the terms of the Geneva Accords.⁹

Lansdale wanted an executive role in the program. General O'Daniel needed a plan for MAAG support to the government's occupation of areas being vacated by the Viet Minh, and Lansdale volunteered to write it. When O'Daniel approved the document, Lansdale took it to Diem, who issued it with only minor changes in late December as the government's National Security Action (Pacification) Directive. Then, although he was technically not even a MAAG officer but an assistant air attaché, Lansdale persuaded O'Daniel to put him in command of the new MAAG division charged with pacification support. From this position, in early January 1955, he persuaded Ambassador Collins to make him the coordinator of all US Mission activity, civilian and military, supporting pacification. The entire gambit had taken him less than six weeks.¹⁰

A month later, on 8 February 1955, the government began the reoccupation of the Camau Peninsula, the southern tip of the country and the first of two zones designated for the assembly of Viet Minh cadres being regrouped to the North. In both areas, Camau and the coastal provinces of Annam from southern Quang Nam to Phu Yen, Viet Minh control had gone uncontested since the end of World War II. Lansdale saw their reoccupation by the Vietnamese Army as an opportunity to display the merits of military civic action. But the Camau operation began before Lansdale's people could impart the Philippine example to all the participating Vietnamese military, and results were mixed. Where the troops were prepared and an Operation Brotherhood medical team

⁸ CSHP 113, *The Saigon Military Mission, June 1954 to December 1956*, 2 vols., October 1970, II, p. 16.

⁹ CSHP 113, I, p. 149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149-153.

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Operation "Gia-Phong:" President Diem follows the troops into the former Viet Minh stronghold of Qui Nhon.



Operation "Gia Phong:" troops of the National Army's 31st Division entering a Binh Dinh village. One result of this "national security action:" young people returned from the hills (captions by Ed Lansdale).

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was on hand, the new Saigon government presence seemed to be well received by a civilian population accustomed to Viet Minh rule. Elsewhere, Lansdale implied, the welcome was more tepid.¹¹ []

There was time for more thorough preparation of the second pacification operation which was launched in late April 1955 in the southern Binh Dinh-northern Phu Yen portion of Central Vietnam. Lansdale claimed to have persuaded Diem to name as its commander a capable officer, Colonel Le Van Kim, whom Diem distrusted for his French associations. Lieutenant Rufus Phillips, [] later the supervisor of American support to Nhu's Strategic Hamlet program, represented Lansdale in this operation. In both Camau and Central Vietnam, the Vietnamese wanted to minimize direct US participation in order to prevent the appearance of foreign control. Phillips, in both operations the only American observer, judged the second to be highly successful. As the Army demonstrated its discipline and good will, he witnessed an increasingly warm welcome by the civilian population. Among the signs of this welcome was the help volunteered by the local citizenry in locating a number of Viet Minh arms caches.¹² []

Phillips also witnessed the clearly spontaneous enthusiasm that greeted Ngo Dinh Diem when the Prime Minister acceded to Lansdale's urging to visit Qui Nhon, the recently reoccupied capital of Binh Dinh Province. At the airstrip there, as the crowd grew, a Filipino with Operation Brotherhood led several Vietnamese in lifting Diem up onto their shoulders. Diem was both terrified by the manhandling—he loathed being touched—and delighted by the crowd's response. On another occasion, dressed in the customary white shark-skin suit, he even waded into a flooded paddy field to greet some astonished rice farmers.¹³ []

The successes of the two pacification operations led Phillips, among others, to believe that the combined deployment of civilian and military resources under the civic action rubric constituted a valid approach to the assimilation of previously Viet Minh-controlled areas. There were, however, two obstacles to such a program. One was the short-term participation of the Vietnamese Army

¹¹ CSHP 113, I, p. 153-157; CSHP 113, II, p. 24-25; [] interview by Thomas Ahern, McLean, VA, 20 January 1964 (hereafter cited as [] interview, 20 January 1964); []

¹² CSHP 113, I, pp. 153-166 []

¹³ Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, pp. 242-243; Rufus Phillips, interview by Thomas Ahern, McLean, VA, 11 October 1989 (hereafter cited as Phillips interview, 11 October 1989); Harwood interview, 25 October 1989. []

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First lessons at Long-My: Lt-Col Duc explains brotherhood between soldiers and civilians. SMM psywarrior Phillips and friend Banzon listen in rear (caption by Ed Lansdale).

in any given operation and the inability of the regular civilian administration to replace it. Phillips and the Vietnamese commander, Colonel Le Van Kim, saw the same administrative vacuum in Binh Dinh that had earlier been pointed out to Paul Harwood in Vinh Long. They tried to get the military commitment in Central Vietnam extended, but to no avail. Since there was no functioning civilian apparatus to take over from the army, the success of the pacification campaign proved transitory. Phillips never got an explanation for the government's failure to exploit the opening created by the Army's apparent success in Central Vietnam. If Lansdale intervened with Diem on the matter, no report of their discussion survives.¹⁴

The second obstacle was the uneven participation of the various agencies, all working more or less autonomously, that comprised the US Mission. MAAG and the US Information Service gave unqualified support. The economic aid section hesitated, however, fearing that to channel resources to civic action through the Defense Ministry would undermine its regular programs of support to embryonic civilian ministries. Lansdale, as coordinator, controlled the deployment only of such resources as individual agencies were willing to commit. Only after persistent Lansdale jawboning did the economic aid people agree to help. It then took until 1957 for their first contribution to arrive in

¹⁴ Phillips interview, 11 October 1989. The record contains no information on the reasons for withdrawing the Army, or by whom the decision was made.

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Vietnam—25,000 pairs of sewing scissors.¹⁵ Yet Diem seems to have been genuinely enthusiastic about the potential of civic action. In May 1955, with Lansdale's encouragement, he appointed a Commissioner General for Civic Action, responsible directly to the Palace. In this as in other efforts aimed at the countryside, the principal concern of both Lansdale and the Prime Minister was to find a surrogate agent to undertake the rural administration that seemed beyond the capacity of the regular bureaucracy to handle.¹⁶

More Trouble with the Sects

Whatever its long-term importance, the establishment of an effective governmental presence in the countryside could get only passing attention while Ngo Dinh Diem's opponents still challenged his authority in Saigon. In the early months of 1955, the prospect of an Army mutiny had receded, and the main threat now came from sect leaders trying to preserve the armed forces that guaranteed their local autonomy.



Hoa Hao General Ngo, whom President Diem desired be taught the precepts of love by us. After knowing us, the beard was trimmed (caption by Ed Lansdale).

¹⁵ Phillips interview, 11 October 1989.

¹⁶ CSHP 113, I, p. 168.

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As noted, Ed Lansdale had met several of the sect leaders in September 1954. Undertaken at Diem's request, these contacts included not only the maverick Cao Dai leader, Trinh Minh The, but also General Nguyen Thanh Phuong, commander of the regular Cao Dai forces, and two Hoa Hao generals. Now, apparently abetted by local French interests, all but General The challenged Diem's authority. The immediate issue was the fate of the sect forces. If Diem were to become more than a neo-colonial figurehead, he would have to find the moral and material leverage needed either to integrate sect forces into the regular Army or to dissolve them.¹⁷

Diem's response was, as usual, to solicit American support. He cannily exploited both Lansdale's idealism and what he must have recognized as the uncoordinated activities of the Lansdale and regular Stations. Perhaps mindful of the fallout from Lansdale's delivery of funds to General The in September 1954, Diem now relied on the Harwood-Nhu channel for cash inducements. For Lansdale, he had another mission, that of demonstrating to the skeptical sect leaders Diem's command of American support by serving as a Palace intermediary. He did not acknowledge this purpose to Lansdale, who apparently took at face value Diem's request to approach Hoa Hao General Ngo and teach him "how to earn the love and affection of his people."¹⁸

Diem took a similar approach to ensuring the cooperation of Nhu's Cao Dai confederate, Trinh Minh The. In late January and early February, as Lansdale negotiated with The on Diem's behalf, he was apparently unaware of simultaneous bargaining between Nhu and the Cao Dai, although Nhu kept Harwood continuously informed. As a result, Lansdale viewed his role as more operative than was actually the case. For his part, Harwood knew nothing of Lansdale's participation. In any case, the parallel negotiations had the desired effect, and one regiment of General The's forces was integrated on 13 February 1955.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Lansdale continued to represent Diem in talks with other sect leaders less receptive to government authority than General The.

With French support of the sect armies coming to an end, General O'Daniel and French High Commissioner Paul Ely named Lansdale to head a joint Franco-American military team to work out arrangements for their demobilization or integration into the regular Army. Consistently more fearful of a

¹⁷ CSHP 113, I, p. 10-11.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ CSHP 113, I, p. 73. Lansdale reported the troops of this regiment as "pledged...to SMM who in turn had insisted that they be loyal to Vietnam" (CSHP 113, II, p. 26). Also see Harwood interview, 21 June 1990, and Memorandum from the Special Assistant [Anderton] to the Ambassador [Collins], "Confidential Funds Project," 25 March 1955, AN 68A 5159, Box 124, Records Group 84, National Archives and Records Administration, Suitland, MD (hereafter cited as NARA).

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sectarian rebellion than other Americans on the scene, Lansdale persuaded O'Daniel and Ely to reassure the sect leaders with a mid-March series of briefings on Franco-American plans.²⁰ Still unpersuaded that Diem would respect their interests, sect leaders including the presumptive Diem loyalist Trinh Minh The formed a United Sects National Front. On 21 March, they issued a manifesto giving Diem five days in which, as Lansdale put it, to "clean out his entire government." Otherwise, they "would go to the people."²¹

As the crisis intensified on the evening of 20 March, Lansdale found himself beginning a four-hour session with the Prime Minister. Diem complained not only about the sects, but about his own Defense Minister's presumption in wanting authority to dismiss "undesirable" Army officers. During the next two days, Lansdale shuttled frantically between Diem and the Cao Dai, assuring Diem that The, at least, was still loyal to the government, despite having signed the manifesto. Ambassador Collins, whom Lansdale had kept informed, wanted to be helpful. He thought he might be able to reassure Cao Dai Generals Phuong and The. But at the ensuing meeting on 22 March, Collins waxed censorious, criticizing the manifesto and questioning its authors' patriotism. It went so badly that Lansdale felt constrained to ask Collins, at the end of the session, to explain to his visitors that three note-taking American participants were Embassy officials, not journalists.²²

Lansdale saw Diem the evening of 22 March. Diem was still worried about control of the military and about Collins having told him that Defense Minister Minh was responsible for the Army.

I explained that Collins was actually defining the chain-of-command, [and that this had been] prompted by Diem ordering troop movements without notifying Minh. Diem asked for an American 'job description' of his responsibilities as President; so I outlined those of the US President.²³

As the crisis mounted, Lansdale noticed a strange passivity in Diem's reaction:

Diem does very little constructive planning in such times of stress; or, at least he has not told me his plans; he pays scant attention to such planning, seems eager to continue reporting the events of the day, what Ambassador Collins has termed "crying on my shoulder."²⁴

²⁰ CSHP 113, I, pp. 66-68, 73-79.

²¹ CSHP 62, p. 6.

²² Ibid., p. 8.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ CSHP 62, p. 6.

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Lansdale tried to fill the gap, suggesting various political and public relations maneuvers that Diem might use to regain the political initiative against the sects. He also tried to mediate the enduring dispute between Diem and General Phuong over pay and subsistence to Cao Dai troops. Of his method in resolving a dispute over the amount already paid, Lansdale later said that, "As usual, I had checked [the matter] out with both parties, telling them that I preferred taking such matters up openly rather than going behind their backs."²⁵ [redacted]

Headquarters and Harwood, meanwhile, were dealing with sect demands for more money. The total amount of this support is not known, but in one action, the DCI approved [redacted] in March 1955 for use in both covert action and intelligence collection in Saigon. With Ambassador Collins's concurrence, Harwood promised Nhu on the 22nd that he would shortly get [redacted] piasters (about [redacted] for distribution to sect leaders; another [redacted] piasters might become available later.²⁶ [redacted]

The Binh Xuyen Insurrection [redacted]

On 29 March, after a week of inconclusive maneuvering, Cao Dai leaders Phuong and The came to Lansdale claiming that the Hoa Hao were colluding with the Binh Xuyen gang in plans to stage a coup de force. They expected an immediate move and implored Lansdale to get Phuong's troops integrated into the national army to prevent their being suborned by the anti-Diem Cao Dai pope, Pham Ngoc Tac. Lansdale undertook to discuss the matter with Collins. At the same time, Diem was telling the French that he was about to use the Army to take over the National Police headquarters. General Ely pressured him into postponing an attack, but the Binh Xuyen preempted the issue, opening fire on Army posts in Saigon. Mortar rounds landed on the Palace grounds, and Lansdale wanted to go to Diem for firsthand reporting of developments. General O'Daniel, apparently concerned for Lansdale's safety, refused to let him go.²⁷ [redacted]

Harwood visited the Palace that evening, and recalled ducking for cover when an explosion rocked the room. He and found himself staring at Diem, Nhu, and the President's military aide underneath the map table at which they had been standing. Sent to find out what was going on, the President's aide

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 6, 9. [redacted]

²⁶ Undated blind memorandum, apparently prepared by ARC staff, [redacted] Memorandum, Special Assistant [McCarthy] to the Ambassador [Collins], "Confidential Funds Project," 25 March 1955, filed in CIA History Staff. There is no basis for the figure of [redacted] used, according to Frances FitzGerald, by "most historians of the period" (Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* [New York: Vintage Books, 1973], p. 106). [redacted]

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 12-15. [redacted]

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returned to say that snipers in a house next to the Palace had fired on a passing Army convoy. Its commander thereupon brought up a 105mm howitzer and fired it point blank through the offending house. Harwood had been at the Palace almost daily during the crisis debriefing Nhu and, on Collins's behalf, urging Diem to refrain from deploying the Army against the Binh Xuyen. On this visit, he was there to check out a French report of a Vietnamese Army advance toward Binh Xuyen territory in Cholon. Diem gave assurances that he had made no such move and did not intend to do so.²⁸

Lansdale was horrified to find out the next morning that Ely had used the threat of French armed intervention to impose a ceasefire, and that Collins supported him. Lansdale protested that "the French Army in effect was assuming a role which made Saigon a protectorate." Collins disagreed, insisting that the French role was only that of mediator. Diem saw it as Lansdale did and complained that Ely had proclaimed himself "commander-in-chief." But Ely and Collins prevailed, at least for the moment. In one development that gratified Lansdale, Diem and General Phuong agreed that day, 30 March, to integrate 8,000 more Cao Dai troops into the national Army, thus denying them to the sects' dissident United Front.²⁹

Meanwhile, Nhu kept Harwood informed of his own efforts to defuse the crisis. While Diem was again using Lansdale as his emissary to Trinh Minh The, Nhu continued his personal negotiations with The and Phuong. A Station report of 29 March, apparently from Nhu, described a meeting at which The agreed to withdraw from the sects' United Front and Phuong undertook to leave the Cabinet. The two Cao Dai generals performed as promised, and Nhu's authority as both negotiator and reporting source was accordingly enhanced.³⁰ While the Embassy was reporting that the rest of the Cabinet was about to quit, Harwood told Washington that it wouldn't: Nhu had said that none of its members had the fortitude to confront Diem with a resignation. None did, and they all stayed, at least for the time being.³¹

On 31 March, probably at French instigation, Bao Dai sent Diem a reproachful telegram from his retreat in Cannes. It deplored the bloodshed—there had been a hundred or so casualties—and obliquely suggested that Diem resign. (The Emperor sent it twice, once in the clear to ensure that Diem's enemies were kept informed.) Ely and Collins maintained their pressure on Diem not to act against the Binh Xuyen, and the Prime Minister was reduced to asking Lansdale whether this meant that the French and the Americans were

²⁸ Note from Paul Harwood, November 1995; Harwood interview, 21 June 1990.

²⁹ CSHP 62, pp. 14-15, 17.

³⁰ Intelligence report CS PD 454, 29 March 1955,

³¹ Harwood interview, 17 October 1989.

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planning to depose him. Lansdale assured him to the contrary, but could offer no help when Diem complained of the corrosive effect on his authority of the enforced standoff. But Lansdale could at least ensure that the Vietnamese perception of events was conveyed to Washington. The day after the French prevented a showdown with the Binh Xuyen, he spent three and a half hours in the prime ministerial bedroom, debriefing people sent in to him by Diem.³²

During this phase of the crisis, Defense Minister Ho Thong Minh resigned over Diem's refusal to guarantee prior consultation with the Cabinet before moving against the Binh Xuyen. Collins thought this an example of Diem's inability to manage people of independent views and reacted by threatening Diem with the withdrawal of US support if Minh were not retained. Minh left the Cabinet anyway, and on 31 March Collins intimated to Washington that he had given up. Diem, he said, had had a "fair chance" to set up a working government, but had "produced little if anything of a constructive nature."³³ Lansdale, meanwhile, complained to Headquarters that he thought Collins destructively inconsistent in criticizing Diem for passivity while preventing him from curbing the Binh Xuyen, now the single most immediate threat to the government's authority.³⁴

Lansdale's major points of disagreement with Collins were the morale of the Army and the sincerity of Cao Dai Generals Phuong and The, who simultaneously professed loyalty to Diem and trafficked with the anti-Diem leadership of the sects' United Front. Lansdale and the regular Station, supported by the MAAG and the Military Attaché, thought the Army could whip the Binh Xuyen, and Lansdale was certain of the good faith of his Cao Dai interlocutors. Collins was doubtful on both counts. Despite being discouraged by the State Department from exploring alternatives to Diem, he wrote John Foster Dulles on 7 April that "my judgment is that Diem does not have the capacity... to prevent this country from falling under Communist control."³⁵

General Collins vs. Ngo Dinh Diem

³⁶ Fearing that Collins would object to the proposal, Lansdale asked Headquarters to approve

³² CSHP 62, pp. 18, 22-27.

³³ J. Lawton Collins, Telegrams to Department of State, 29 and 31 March 1955, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57, I, Vietnam*, pp. 158, 169 (hereafter cited as FRUS).

³⁴ SAIG 6517, 20 April 1955, cited in CSHP 113, I, p. 101.

³⁵ J. Lawton Collins, Telegram to Department of State, 7 April 1955, *FRUS 1955-57, Vietnam, I*, p. 219.

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it without ambassadorial coordination. Washington sympathized with his dilemma, but insisted that Collins be consulted. As it turned out, Collins readily approved the idea. At that point, however, John Foster Dulles had already endorsed a suggestion from the DDP, Frank Wisner, to postpone final word to the Station until Washington could discuss the plan directly with the Ambassador, who was to be recalled for consultations on Diem's political future. Lansdale, meanwhile, was to temporize if Diem pressed him on the matter.³⁷ []

Apprehensive about the line that Collins would take in Washington, Lansdale cabled the DCI asking for permission to accompany the Ambassador to Washington. The reply, from Wisner, turned him down, but urged him to try to prevent a damaging rejection by Diem of Collins's latest recommendations for government appointments. Lansdale spent the two days before Collins's 20 April departure shuttling between the Palace and the Embassy, but was unable to prevent what he saw as a fundamental misunderstanding between Diem and Collins. The result was that Collins left for Washington persuaded that Diem would take only sycophantic yes-men into the Cabinet, whereas Lansdale thought Diem was insisting merely that they be "anticolonialist honest courageous men."³⁸ Lansdale seems to have been taking Diem at his word, while Collins, who never questioned Diem's sincerity, had the better appreciation for what this formula would mean in practice. []

Harwood was experiencing the same problems with Nhu that Lansdale confronted with Diem. On 21 April 1955, just after Collins's departure, Harwood predicted to Headquarters that, at an impending discussion of the police problem, Nhu would ask why Diem was being prevented from asserting control of his own government. Harwood had already received Nhu's letter protesting Collins's latest effort at Cabinet-broadening. The letter noted that Collins had acknowledged consulting other Vietnamese on a reorganized government, Nhu insisted that compliance by Diem would mean "the negation of the whole revolutionary ideal...and the realization of a regime like that of Chiang Kai-shek, ending in a Viet Minh victory, they alone being capable of sweeping away all this rot."³⁹ []

³⁶ One subsequent cable from Lansdale gives the amount as [] piasters. SAIG 6925, 16 May 1955, [] Later the Station advanced [] piasters, which was ultimately returned. SAIG 8226, 29 August 1955, *ibid.*; Redick interview, 28 September 1989. []

³⁷ CSHP 113, I, pp. 95-97. The whole thing came to naught when Diem concluded that the authors of the idea could not produce. He returned the money in late August, but used Lansdale as intermediary in unproductive negotiations until shortly before Ba Cut was captured in April 1956. []

³⁸ CSHP 113, I, pp. 97-98; SAIG 6517, 20 April 1955, quoted in CSHP 113, I, p. 100. []

³⁹ SAIG 6523, 21 April 1955, []

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This apocalyptic vision of the results of a non-Communist coalition illustrates the perceptual gap, in the matter of defining a legitimate authority for South Vietnam, that already separated the Ngo brothers from their American sponsors. Diem had once written that "a sacred respect is due to the person of the sovereign. ... He is the mediator between the people and Heaven as he celebrates the national cult."⁴⁰ In the midst of the struggle with the sects, Diem and Nhu seem to have seen their mission in terms both mystical and proprietary. The Americans, on the other hand, might be divided as to tactics, but all saw the task as one of trying to reconcile the various anti-Communist interests and beginning the construction of a popularly based government while holding off the Viet Minh.

The divergence of American opinion over tactics, which persisted until the eve of the coup in 1963, resulted in a relationship with Diem that was adversarial at two levels. First was the opposition of the US officials who thought Diem incapable of succeeding and wanted him replaced. The second level arose from the tension between Diem and those Americans who saw him as the only candidate for leadership of an anti-Communist South Vietnam, but who wanted him to accept their views of the institutional form it should take. Both the CIA Stations saw the weaknesses in Diem's leadership, and Harwood in particular had already experienced one confrontation. But neither he nor Lansdale saw any alternative. As Ambassador Collins left for Washington, both Stations remained committed to their mandate from Headquarters to help Diem survive.

⁴⁰ Nguyen Thai, *The Government of Men in the Republic of Vietnam* (Thesis, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, 1962), quoted in FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, p. 109.

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CHAPTER 6

Leverage in Washington

Collins's departure for Washington on 20 April launched the most fateful episode in CIA's relationship with the Diem government. It also illustrated both Collins's tangled relations with CIA and the Agency's capacity at that time to exploit the US media for support of political action. In Hong Kong, enroute, the Ambassador picked up a copy of *Life* magazine with a cover photo of a triumphal Diem reception in Central Vietnam. The photograph and accompanying story had resulted from a Lansdale initiative that Wisner took to *Time/Life* in January. He gave the editors a background paper, and they undertook to publish a feature on Diem's growing political stature in Free Vietnam.¹

Collins arrived in Washington outraged by this publicity for what he regarded as a lost cause. He told an interdepartmental meeting that Diem had no popular following. The photo was faked, he insisted, probably by Paul Harwood, and CIA was "slanting its reports." Wisner responded that he understood Diem to have scored a genuine public relations triumph, and Collins "practically called [him] a liar."²

Wisner promptly asked the Station for its side of the story. The thrust of its reply was that money could not buy the popular feeling so evident in the photograph. Wisner later told Harwood that he had read the cable to a subsequent session of the same interdepartmental committee, with some consequent damage to Collins's credibility in Washington. It seemed that Collins had forgotten his own approval of the *Time/Life* project, given to Wisner in Washington in early February and confirmed in Honolulu on his way back to Saigon.³

¹ Deputy Director for Plans, Memorandum for Support Assistant to the DDP, "Proposed Time Magazine Cover Story on Diem," 2 February 1955,

² Harwood interview, 17 October 1989; John Caswell, interview, 13 December 1963, 22 April 1955; Harwood interview, 17 October 1989; unsigned memorandum, "Significant Travel by Premier Diem Outside Saigon Area," 24 April 1955,

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Harwood thought Collins's apparent forgetfulness may have represented a fundamental lack of interest in the covert action program. The Ambassador never, throughout his tenure in Saigon, asked for a briefing on it.⁴

With or without a formal briefing, Collins had already decided that CIA officers in Saigon enjoyed too much freedom of action. State Department records hold a memorandum by Deputy Chief of Mission Randolph Kidder noting that the Ambassador had "directed that [CIA] will periodically review" its current activities with him and Kidder. According to Kidder, Allen Dulles sent George Aurell to Saigon in February 1955 to "discuss the above decision with Ambassador Collins. No change in the Ambassador's directive was made."⁵

Why CIA Headquarters felt the need to make such a démarche is not clear. The record leaves no doubt that the Agency consistently sought Ambassadorial approval for its action programs in South Vietnam. In the most potentially sensitive case, Headquarters summarily rejected Lansdale's request to forego ambassadorial coordination.

It is also not clear why Collins, who as Paul Harwood noted had never asked for a briefing on the action program, concluded that CIA in Saigon had too much freedom of action. The most likely explanation is the Ambassador's disapproval of the hamlet militia program, which Harwood had begun supporting during the tenure of Ambassador Heath. Collins may have feared that the Agency was running other programs which, however well coordinated in Washington, might not meet his own approval.

Collins had no reciprocal obligation to keep the CIA Stations informed of his intentions, and he did not share with them his 7 April 1955 recommendation to State that Diem be replaced. CIA Headquarters, presumably aware of it at least after the mid-April meeting that discussed Collins's recall, was also silent. As Collins prepared to leave, Lansdale wanted to know how he should respond to the anticipated probing by Diem as to American intentions. Collins told him to assure the Prime Minister of continued US support. The Ambassador's well-known differences with Diem rendered this guarantee somewhat suspect, and Lansdale was uneasy. But for the first week of Collins's absence he had no choice but to feign optimism in his dealings with Diem.⁶

⁴ Harwood interview, 16 May 1990.

⁵ Randolph Kidder, Memorandum for the Record, untitled, 11 March 1955, AN 68A 5159, Box 124, RG 84, NARA

⁶ Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 276-277.

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~~SECRET//X1~~**Showdown with the Binh Xuyen**

In the last week of April, tension with the Binh Xuyen mounted once more. In an almost exact reprise of the events of late March, Diem told Lansdale of his intention to remove Lai Van Sang, the chief of the National Police; the same information came from Nhu via Harwood. This time Collins was not around to object, and Diem acted on 26 April without informing the French. He appointed a new security chief and set up a headquarters for him outside the sector controlled by the French Army. The rumor mill continued to predict French and American defection from Diem's cause, and Lansdale begged Headquarters for the authority to assure Diem and other Vietnamese officials of Washington's continuing commitment.

This elicited a reply from Allen Dulles urging restraint regarding Diem and pointing out that any assurances of the kind Lansdale wanted would be sent through the chargé d'affaires, Randolph Kidder. In any case, Dulles said, no assurances of any sort could be given until the conclusion of deliberations then being conducted "at the highest level," and "you should be prepared for [the] possibility that this might involve some changes in relations to Diem."⁷

This cautionary word reflected General Collins's formidable presence in Washington. The contretemps over the *Life* cover story may have tarnished Collins's credibility, but the Ambassador had two advantages in the debate over what to do about Diem. One was the strength of his conviction of Diem's incapacity. The other was his status as personal representative of the President. The title was designed to meet the peculiarity of his accreditation to both the Diem government and the residual French command in Vietnam, but it accurately reflected his relationship with President Eisenhower. Within a few days of his arrival in Washington, he had prevailed on the President and a reluctant Secretary of State to start working with the French and Bao Dai to find a replacement for Diem. On 27 April, at the close of the working day, three cables went to the Embassy in Paris with instructions on the way to broach the subject with the French.⁸

As State was telling Paris how to begin preparing Diem's removal, an uninformed but suspicious Lansdale was looking for a way to forestall just such a move. By 27 April, he had sounded out the members of the country team and confirmed that all, including Chargé d'Affaires Kidder, thought Diem could beat the Binh Xuyen.⁹ Early on the 28th (near the close of business on the 27th

⁷ Special Assistant [Anderton], Memorandum for the Ambassador [Collins], untitled, 25 March 1955, AN 68A 5159, Box 124, RG 84, NARA; CSHP 113, I, pp. 101-102. The quotation is from 26 April 1955, p. 104.

⁸ FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam, pp. 294-299.

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in Washington), he asked Kidder to authorize the country team members to let their respective headquarters have their views, but Kidder declined, saying that Collins already knew them. Lansdale then turned to the regular Station, and by 0900 hours they had sent a joint cable, telling Headquarters that it was the "considered opinion" of CIA in Saigon that Diem had a better chance to succeed than any prospective replacement; failure to support him would doom any successor government and benefit only the Viet Minh. The message added that information just received and being passed to Kidder warranted a country-team estimate and suggested that the DCI get the Department of State to request one from Saigon.¹⁰ [redacted]

Part of what the State Department later called "a flood of reports and recommendations" from Lansdale, this cable arrived at Headquarters on the evening of 27 April local time. Along with the other reports, it provoked a series of telephone calls from...[George] Aurell to [Archibald] Roosevelt (acting for Wisner), to Allen Dulles, to [Undersecretary] Hoover, to the Secretary, to [Director of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs] Ken Young. The result was a stay order on Paris not to embark on the course of action agreed to late yesterday afternoon.¹¹ [redacted]

While the State Department was putting a hold on preparations to replace Diem, Headquarters asked Saigon for more detail on events there. By the time the request arrived, the replay of the late March crisis was resuming. Shortly after noon on the 28th, mortar rounds again exploded on the Palace grounds. Diem called General Ely to protest—the fire seemed to be coming from the Binh Xuyen in an area protected by the French—while his secretary was on another line giving Lansdale a running account of the firing and of the argument with Ely. As another round landed nearby, Diem told Ely he was ordering the Army to return fire and hung up. His secretary relayed this to Lansdale and also hung up.¹² [redacted]

Some students of early US involvement in Vietnam have believed that Lansdale, anxious to block any move in Washington to abandon Diem, encouraged the Prime Minister to challenge the Binh Xuyen, and that it was

⁹ Clandestine Service Historical Paper (CSHP) 113, *The Saigon Military Mission, June 1954 to December 1956*, 2 vols., October 1970, I, p. 38; Randolph Kidder, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, Washington, DC, 22 January 1990 (hereafter cited as Kidder interview, 22 January 1990). [redacted]

¹⁰ CSHP 113, I, p. 40; SAIG 6625, 28 April 1955, of which a retyped copy is filed in [redacted]

¹¹ Deputy Special Assistant for Intelligence, Department of State, Untitled Memorandum, 28 April 1955, *FRUS, 1955-57, Vietnam I*, pp. 305-306. The "stay" order is reprinted on page 301. [redacted]

¹² CSHP 113, I, pp. 105-106. [redacted]

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the Army that fired first. Lansdale clearly did not urge Diem to avoid a show-down, but so far as his interpreter, Joe Redick, could later recall, he said nothing to incite one either.¹³

Lansdale's team and the regular Station spent the next two days keeping Washington abreast of Diem's progress against the insurrection. Lansdale concentrated on Diem, other contacts at the Palace, and Trinh Minh The. Harwood, meanwhile, debriefed Ngo Dinh Nhu, getting from him copies of reports prepared for Diem by the chief of the Army's intelligence service. Since the fighting in late March the regular Station had been in almost nightly contact with an agent in the Binh Xuyen; he was in a position to provide authoritative tactical information. Harwood passed much of this to Nhu for use by the Army.¹⁴

Reversing Course

On 29 April, the State Department asked for the Country Team estimate suggested by CIA in Saigon; Kidder's reply confirmed the optimistic assessment of Diem's chances sent the day before by the two CIA Stations.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Vietnamese Army, supported by Trinh Minh The's Cao Dai troops, seized the initiative in the battle for Saigon. The Hoa Hao hung back, watching as their Binh Xuyen allies went onto the defensive.¹⁶ The confidence in Diem and the Army voiced by Lansdale and the Country Team seemed about to be vindicated.

At this point Diem showed Lansdale a second telegram from Bao Dai. No longer content with the veiled threat of late March, Bao Dai now ordered Diem and his Army chief of staff to Paris. Diem was to turn over the Army to General Nguyen Van Vy, a French citizen and supporter of the former chief of staff and would-be mutineer, General Hinh. Diem told Lansdale that the Army and the loyal Cao Dai refused to accept Vy's authority and that they wanted Diem to endorse their intended repudiation of the emperor. Diem wanted to know if the US would accept this.¹⁷

Lansdale's description of the incident does not refer to any consultation with Headquarters or the chargé d'affaires. It says he responded that Washington

¹³ Joseph Redick, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, Staunton, VA, 22 January 1991 (hereafter cited as Redick interview, 22 January 1991).

¹⁴ CSHP 113, II, p. 41; Magill interview, 24 October 1989.

¹⁵ CSHP 113, I, pp. 106-107.

¹⁶ CSHP 113, II, p. 41.

¹⁷ CSHP 113, I, p. 108. As was often the case, Nhu was simultaneously giving Harwood what Diem was telling Lansdale. The same information, attributed to a source described in terms that fit Nhu, is contained in SAIG 6659, 29 April 1955.

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April 1955: Decision in Saigon-Cholon. (Caption by Ed Lansdale).

"would accept a legal action, but that dethronement by voice vote...such as that described by Diem was hardly a legal proceeding."¹⁸ At the same time, as recounted later in his book, Lansdale encouraged Diem to defy the Emperor's order to report to him in France. He pictures Diem in an agony of indecision over the conflict between imperial authority and the national interest, a conflict that Lansdale implies he helped him resolve. "Slowly, painfully," they came to the conclusion that if Diem left, "there would be no moral basis upon which the government could govern...freedom would founder." In fact, Nhu had already told Harwood that Diem would ignore the order. Diem did so, though he also resisted sect pressure formally to repudiate the Emperor. Chargé d'Affaires Randolph Kidder, to whom Diem also described his dilemma, adopted a more neutral stance, saying that the Prime Minister would have to bear full responsibility for any defiance of imperial command.¹⁹ □

¹⁸ CSHP 113, II, pp. 44-45. □

¹⁹ SAIG 6678, 29 April 1955. □ Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, p. 299; FRUS, 1955-57, Vietnam, I, p. 318. □

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Diem's decision to stand fast deprived General Vy of any resources except that portion of the Imperial Guard still loyal to Bao Dai. These modest forces were enough to provoke near-chaos in Diem's high command, even as the Army battled with the Binh Xuyen for control of Saigon. While the pro-Diem Cao Dai were trying to arrest General Vy, Vy's Imperial Guard arrested and then released Diem loyalists, including the Army Chief of Staff. According to Lansdale's account, Colonel Tran Van Don then somehow persuaded Vy to trick the French into delivering armored vehicles they had been withholding from the Vietnamese. Vy turned them over to the Army, which promptly deployed them against the Binh Xuyen.²⁰

Perhaps helped by Vy's armored vehicles, Diem's army made short work of the Binh Xuyen. By noon on 30 April, the rebels had been driven from Saigon and all but a few isolated strong points in Cholon.²¹ The Binh Xuyen and the Hoa Hao retained some nuisance value for another year, but as French support faded away they no longer presented a real threat.

An Agency officer then in Washinton later recalled that on a weekend afternoon, presumably either Saturday, 30 April, or Sunday, 1 May, Allen Dulles and Frank Wisner took the latest reporting on the battle for Saigon to John Foster Dulles's house. Diem was holding his own against the Binh Xuyen, the reports said, and people were rallying to him. The DCI and Wisner argued that this was the wrong moment to fulfill President Eisenhower's commitment to Collins to look for a Diem replacement. The Secretary of State agreed and, with his visitors still present, telephoned the President. He summarized the Agency reporting and recommended postponing the intended withdrawal of US support. In Collins's absence—he was already on the way back to Saigon—Eisenhower concurred.²²

As the meeting ended, an aide announced the arrival of Couve de Murville, the French Ambassador, and the Secretary of State assured his departing visitors that "he would take care of the French." On the afternoon of 1 May, with Collins still en route to Saigon, a State Department telegram to the Embassy reaffirmed the US commitment to Ngo Dinh Diem.²³

²⁰ CSHP 113, II, pp. 42-43; Memorandum, S/S [Fisher Howe] to The Secretary [John Foster Dulles], "French Aid to Anti-Government Elements in South Vietnam," 6 May 1955, citing ARMA [Army Attaché] Report 982, 2 May 1955, Decimal File 751 GOO/5-255, RG 59, NARA.

²¹ CSHP 113, II, p. 43.

²² Caswell interview, 27 February 1990. Caswell described his presence at the meeting as that of "someone who can pronounce the names."

²³ Ibid.; John Foster Dulles, Telegram to Embassy Saigon, 1 May 1955, US Department of State, *FRUS, 1955-57, Vietnam, I*, p. 344.

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The battle for Saigon, April 1955. (CIA photos)

Information from Lansdale's sources represented only part of the reporting that persuaded President Eisenhower to reverse his decision to abandon Ngo Dinh Diem. Much of it was acquired by the officers of the regular Station, especially Paul Harwood in his frequent meetings with Ngo Dinh Nhu. Allen Dulles, however, treated it all as emanating from Lansdale, whom he had personally selected for the Saigon assignment, and whom he regarded as the

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The battle for Saigon, April 1955. [redacted] (CIA photos)

Agency's preeminent authority on Vietnam. Wittingly or otherwise, Lansdale lent that authority not only to his own reporting but to that of the regular Station. In so doing he became the largest single influence on deliberations in Washington at the most critical point of Diem's tenure before 1963.²⁴ [redacted]

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Cesar Climaco, director of Operation Brotherhood in Saigon, organizing a boys brigade to clean up part of the city destroyed during the Binh Xuyen fighting. Note presence of Ngo Dinh Diem in upper tier (caption by Ed Lansdale).

More generally, the episode illustrates one of the salient features of the Agency's relationship with Ngo Dinh Diem, namely, that CIA exercised its influence much more effectively on Diem's behalf than on Diem himself. He seems never to have acted in the spirit of quid pro quo, but rather as one entitled to the satisfaction of his demands by the justice of his cause and by the US interest in seeing him succeed. Diem undoubtedly never learned the details of the Agency's operative role in arranging the suspension of State's instructions to Paris, and then persuading the Secretary of State and the President to rescind their commitment to Collins to abandon him. But he would certainly have regarded this service as no more than his due.

It is not certain, of course, that without CIA support Diem would have been forced from office. For one thing, he still had committed backers on Capitol Hill. Senator Mike Mansfield had threatened to cut off aid to Vietnam if Diem were replaced, and Congresswoman Edna Kelly of New York spoke for many on the House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) in opposing withdrawal of US support for him. And two influential State Department players—Walter Robertson, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, and Kenneth Young, Director of the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs—were unpersuaded by Collins's arguments; they saw no viable alternative to Diem. John Foster Dulles, less committed to Diem than any of these, had always ques-

²⁴ Caswell interview, 27 February 1990.

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tioned whether anyone better was to be found. And Diem's success against the Binh Xuyen would have strengthened his supporters' hand even without help from CIA.²⁵

But negotiations with Paris, once under way, might have acquired momentum of their own. With a foot in the door, the French would have fought hard to bring Diem down, and Ambassador Collins would probably have supported them even after the defeat of the Binh Xuyen. The certainty is that DCI Dulles, exploiting Lansdale's advocacy in Saigon and his own ready access to the Secretary of State, ensured that the issue would not be joined. Doubts about Diem persisted, but the die was cast.

The same combination of goal-oriented action and intellectual objectivity that most CIA officers brought to bear on their dealings with Diem and Nhu also produced pioneering work on the operational concepts and the methods of inter-agency coordination that later defined the American counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam. All of this taken into account, the Agency's role in consolidating Diem's hold on the government of South Vietnam remains its most substantial achievement of the Second Indochina War.

²⁵ Kenneth Young, Memorandum to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, 30 April 1955, *FRUS, 1955-57, Vietnam, I*, pp. 337-339.

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CHAPTER 7

Democracy or Autocracy?

The climactic Agency contribution to the consolidation of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime came with its intervention on Diem's behalf at the end of April 1955. Thereafter, although still an active and influential player, the Agency no longer dominated US efforts to ensure his survival. Ed Lansdale, to be sure, remained in contact with Diem until the end of his tour in December 1956, and a succession of Agency officers continued Paul Harwood's association with Ngo Dinh Nhu. But the end of the continuous crisis that began with Diem's accession was accompanied by events that reduced his dependence on CIA for support against the sects and for a voice in Washington.

The first of these came with the death of Lansdale's principal Cao Dai contact, General Trinh Minh The, and the consequent decline in Lansdale's influence with the religious sects. Second was the arrival of a new ambassador. With the reaffirmation of US support for Diem, General Collins's distaste for the Prime Minister made him odd man out, and he left Saigon only a few weeks after returning from his late April visit to Washington. G. Frederick Reinhardt arrived with instructions to take a conciliatory approach with the thin-skinned Diem, and he set out to improve the tone of the relationship with the Palace. In so doing, he reduced the government's dependence on its CIA contacts to get a sympathetic hearing.

By this time, John Foster Dulles had already confronted the French on the question of Diem's tenure. Meeting French Prime Minister Edgar Fauré just after Diem's defeat of the Binh Xuyen, Dulles intimidated him into abandoning French opposition to the Ngo brothers. Fauré argued that Diem was "not

¹ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (Penguin Books, 1984), p. 223.

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only incapable but mad." But threatened with the withdrawal of US support to Free Vietnam and thus to the remaining French military forces there, he reluctantly gave in.²

As the last of the Binh Xuyen forces were fleeing Saigon on 2 May, Ed Lansdale's closest sect ally, General Trinh Minh The of the Cao Dai, died in a final skirmish. Lansdale continued mediating with the sects on Diem's behalf and tried to use The's successor to help rally them to the government. But The's influence as commander of an autonomous Cao Dai army was now lost, and Lansdale's role as honest broker did not prevent the Cao Dai pope and the Hoa Hao leadership from trying to hold on to their respective enclaves.³

Reunification Elections Repudiated

Lansdale continued nevertheless to remind the sect leaders that Diem enjoyed US favor. He and the regular Station also continued to serve Diem as an information channel to Washington. In July 1955, only two months after the battle for Saigon, Diem exploited this access again to register his opposition to reunification elections. Mandated by the signatories to the Geneva Accords, these elections were scheduled for 1956, with preparatory consultations to begin in 1955. The State Department was giving qualified support to British and French pressure on Diem to participate. In this context, on 5 July, Ambassador Reinhardt urged Diem to retreat from the standard Saigon denial that, as a non-signatory, South Vietnam had any obligation to respect the Accords.⁴

The session ended with no commitment from Diem, who called the next day for separate meetings with the acting chief of Lansdale's Station, Gordon Jorgensen, and John Anderton, since April 1955 the chief of the regular Station. In an open appeal for CIA intervention in Washington, Diem told Anderton that he wanted CIA to intercede with the "highest councils in Washington" to avoid the "defeatism" and neutralism" that cooperating in election preparations would produce. Apparently without consulting the Ambassador, the Stations relayed Diem's plea. Their intervention may well have had some effect

² Herring, *America's Longest War*, pp. 54-55; US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57, I, Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 372-378, 393-399. The term "Free Vietnam" for Vietnamese territory below the 17th parallel was used in American official correspondence for about a year after the Geneva Accords. It seems not to have had any formal basis and was gradually replaced by the term South Vietnam. At this same time, from mid-1955 into early 1956, the Diem government and the US began to popularize the term Viet Cong—meaning Vietnamese Communists and pejorative in tone—as a replacement for the respectable Viet Minh.

³ CSHP 113, I, pp. 128-132.

⁴ *FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam*, pp. 475-476.

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as there was already working-level reluctance in the State Department to pressure Diem into unequal electoral competition with the more populous and tightly controlled North.⁵ []

Whatever the Agency's influence on the decision, Washington did, in effect, give Diem license to sabotage the preliminary talks. CIA in Saigon then set out to help find a pretext for this that would be acceptable to the pro-unification and generally neutralist Asians such as Burma's U Nu, whom Diem was then trying to cultivate.⁶ []

The Frustrations of a Kingmaker []

As usual, to act on Diem's behalf was easier than to get him to act, and Lansdale, who had hoped personally to instruct Diem in the ways of democratic leadership, grew increasingly frustrated. Although regarded by some colleagues as consciously engaged in creating his own legend, Lansdale never claimed substantial influence over Diem; he once told Paul Harwood that Diem took perhaps 10 percent of his advice. Within weeks of the early May success against the Binh Xuyen, Lansdale seems to have despaired of acquiring enough influence to make the effort worth continuing. He wrote to General Leland Hobbes, who had furnished [] for his work in the Philippines, asking for help in arranging a transfer back to Manila. Hobbes brought the matter to John Foster Dulles, who wrote to President Eisenhower in early June that Magsaysay badly needed his erstwhile advisor to help fend off the political opposition. Eisenhower agreed, and Dulles authorized Lansdale to fly to Manila in July to "test Filipino reactions."⁷ []

As it turned out, the visit generated intense opposition from the American Ambassador [] as well as from Filipino politicians and newspapers sensitive to the return of a reputed kingmaker. There is no evidence that Magsaysay expressed interest in Lansdale's return, or indeed that they even met. In late July Dulles told Eisenhower that the trip had been "counterproductive," and Lansdale stayed in Saigon.⁸ []

⁵ SAIG 7528, 7 July 1955, [] (no reply has been found); G. Frederick Reinhardt, Telegram to Department of State, 5 July 1955, *FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam*, p. 475; Kenneth T. Young, Jr., Letter to Ambassador Reinhardt, 10 June 1955, *FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam*, p. 444. []

⁶ Paul Harwood, interview by Thomas Ahern, McLean, VA, 27 March 1991. []

⁷ Harwood interview 17 October 1989; Currey, *Lansdale*, p. 179. []

⁸ Currey, *Lansdale*, p. 179. Currey cites two memorandums on the subject from Dulles to Eisenhower, dated 7 June and 26 July 1955. He does not explain how the purpose of Lansdale's visit became known to Philippine press and political circles, nor why Lansdale did not approach the Dulles brothers or Magsaysay directly. []

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Like many Americans, Lansdale tended to blame Diem's intractability on Ngo Dinh Nhu. As Lansdale's biographer put it, "always there was Nhu to whisper behind his back and to counter the suggestions he made [to Diem]." Lansdale acknowledged Diem's innate rigidity, but vented his frustrations on Nhu, describing him as a "Mussolini type character who had set up a network of local district controls styled after the Japanese system [during Japan's World War II occupation of Indochina]." He thought "Nhu reveled in this secret type of government control of the people, and slowly attempted to evolve a Fascist type state."⁹ [redacted]

But Diem made the decisions, and Diem was not to be budged. If reassignment to Manila was also not in the cards, Lansdale concluded, there might still be an opportunity to improve the performance of the American bureaucracy in Vietnam. He thought the activities of its autonomous agencies should be integrated in order to compensate for the Saigon government's weaknesses. Accordingly, on returning from his failed mission to Manila, he proposed a new coordinating role for himself in the US Mission. Attributing the idea to General John O'Daniel, chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), he cabled a suggestion that he be made the new ambassador's "assistant for action [on] overall political-economic-military affairs." The reply, drafted by Frank Wisner and released by Dulles on 8 August, did not deny the need for better coordination, but said that the proposed role would "probably be an unwise arrangement." Noting that Lansdale had failed to mention Reinhardt's reaction to the idea, Wisner pointed out that the Ambassador would probably regard the coordination function as his own.¹⁰ [redacted]

Whatever his disappointment at these setbacks, Lansdale persevered with his efforts to help Diem build a functioning government. Even during his absence in Manila, his deputy, Gordon Jorgensen, was fighting for Embassy approval of a Civil Guard designed to protect the rural population from anticipated Viet Cong incursions. Working with General O'Daniel, Lansdale also negotiated an agreement with Cao Dai and Hoa Hao leaders to assimilate more of their armed forces into the national Army. Diem accepted the American proposal and integrated them in July.¹¹ [redacted]

His optimism apparently restored, Lansdale pursued not only the sect negotiations but further efforts to bind the government to its rural constituency. He wanted to convert the ad hoc program of military civic action into something more comprehensive, and later in the year he got Diem to create a civilian

⁹ Ibid, p. 179; Edward Lansdale interview, 6 January 1964, [redacted]

¹⁰ [redacted] 12.5.55, [redacted] Lansdale's cable has not been found. Its content is summarized in Dulles's reply. [redacted]

¹¹ CSHP 113, II, pp. 50, 54, [redacted]

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agency reporting directly to the Palace. Lansdale also hoped to use demobilized veterans to help link the government to the countryside [redacted] [redacted] to help form the Vietnam Veterans League. Lansdale wanted this organization to be independent of the government, but Diem, always jealous of his authority, did not. At least partly for this reason—the perennial shortage of indigenous leadership talent hindered any organizational effort in South Vietnam—it never prospered. The Philippine medical project, Operation Brotherhood, ingratiated itself with its patients, but its efforts were not followed by an effective indigenous medical program, and any contribution it made to the Saigon government's public image proved to be transitory.¹² [redacted]

It is not clear whether Lansdale recognized the limited ability of Philippine-based programs to popularize the Vietnamese Government and blunt the effect of Communist propaganda. The record suggests that, by mid-1955, he had largely delegated these programs to subordinates and was concentrating on trying to influence Diem to shape the institutions of the new central government. The regular Station, working with Ngo Dinh Nhu, then became the principal source of direct CIA support to political action in the countryside. The main instrument of these efforts was the National Revolutionary Movement, which Nhu [redacted] had created in late 1954 to meet the need for an ostensibly nongovernmental sponsor for pro-Diem propaganda. [redacted]

The Uphill Road to Political Reform [redacted]

In June 1955, Harwood still saw the NRM as merely a device to elect approved candidates to the national constituent assembly then being planned. But Headquarters had more ambitious goals, writing to the field in July that the NRM should help bridge “the present enormous gap between the Government and the people.” It should do this by representing a program of “political, social, and economic reform which [has] a direct bearing on the particular livelihoods of individual Vietnamese.”¹³ [redacted]

Headquarters recognized that this was easier said than done, adding that the NRM's problems were “directly related to those plaguing local governmental administration throughout Vietnam.” The proposal left unspecified the content of the desired reforms and concentrated instead on matters of organization and control. Speaking of a proposed NRM convention, Headquarters assumed that its proceedings would have to be controlled from the top in order to ensure approval of the desired statutes and officers. But these officers would have to

¹² CSHP 113, I, pp. 138-146, 150-153, 177-195; Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 207-213. [redacted]

¹³ FVSW 1106, 21 July 1955. [redacted]

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be "outstanding nationalists who are well respected and who have superior leadership ability."¹⁴ The proposal offered no advice on how to find such people, for whom both stations had been searching ever since the spring of 1954. Headquarters did, however, wrestle with the question whether outstanding nationalists would consent to be manipulated in the way it proposed. It argued that, far from being a tool for repressing divergent viewpoints, "the build-in control mechanisms are designed to encourage NRM members to use authorized channels of communication." This, Headquarters thought, would "discourage the development of needless and crippling factionalism."¹⁵

Although painfully aware of the shortage of local talent, Harwood did not argue the point. Instead, he tried to make good the lack of content in the Headquarters proposal. In late summer, he sent home a list of objectives that included specific agrarian and labor reforms including land redistribution, creation of democratic institutions, and expanded public services.¹⁶

But it was one thing to set goals, another to get Diem to adopt them. Neither the Americans nor even Nhu could move Diem on the vital issues of land reform and administrative overhaul. In June, for example, Diem's US advisor on agrarian matters, Wolf Ladejinsky, had to report the failure of his latest effort to interest the prime minister in either land reform or in correcting the "lassitude" of local administration. According to Ladejinsky, Diem agreed in principle, but insisted that solutions could be attempted only in the context of "pacification and stabilization." To Ladejinsky's appeal that Diem play a direct role in persuading farmers of their stake in the new regime, the President "pleaded extreme preoccupation with urgent matters."¹⁷

In his talks with Harwood, Nhu claimed to share American convictions about administrative and land tenure reform in the provinces. But he had no more luck with Diem than did Ladejinsky. In early September, Harwood reported that one of Nhu's basic criticisms of Diem's rule was the failure to advance these two reforms.¹⁸

A Legitimizing Referendum

While Nhu and Harwood talked about domestic reforms, Diem was beginning to deal with the implications of his stonewalling on preparations for all-Vietnam elections. The prospect of claiming for South Vietnam the status of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ FVSA 1542, 5 September 1955,

¹⁷ Memorandum, Wolf Ladejinsky to Ambassador Reinhardt, 7 June 1955, *FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam*, pp. 456-458.

¹⁸ FVSA 1542, 5 September 1955,

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nation-state focused Diem on the need to strengthen his legitimacy, which at that point still derived from the mandate of the French puppet emperor, Bao Dai. In June 1955, Diem's foreign minister told Ambassador Reinhardt that the government might depose Bao Dai through a national referendum. Reinhardt and the Department thought this procedure lacked legal standing, and they urged Diem to shelve the matter until it could be properly dealt with by the national constituent assembly then being prepared. A little later, in July or August, Diem gave Lansdale to understand that he might stage demonstrations against Bao Dai and respond to this ostensible popular demand with a decree deposing the Emperor.¹⁹ [redacted]

Lansdale was evidently unaware of the official US position. With a sense of high accomplishment, he later described his success in persuading Diem to abandon the contrived street protest in favor of the very referendum idea that State deplored. The regular Station supported the Embassy, but could not urge its position on Nhu, who was out of Saigon in late September and early October. As preparations advanced, there was nothing to be done but withhold support for the government's referendum propaganda. Meanwhile, Headquarters at least tacitly acquiesced in Lansdale's more aggressive approach, noting the "instrumental" work on the referendum being done by a Filipino constitutional expert Lansdale had brought to Saigon.²⁰ [redacted]

Lansdale set out to help ensure a decisive Diem victory. Hoping to see the government burnish its image with free and fair elections, he urged Diem not to allow any irregularities at the polls. [redacted]

[redacted] According to the official results of the 23 October referendum, over 98 percent of those voting preferred Diem to Bao Dai as chief of state. Three days later, Diem proclaimed himself President of the Republic of Vietnam. In so doing, he achieved the last two of what the regular Station saw as his three basic aims. First, with American support, he had successfully defied the French. Now, he had removed Bao Dai and assumed absolute authority below the 17th parallel.²¹ [redacted]

The regular Station (though apparently not Lansdale) saw substantial government manipulation in the scale of Diem's majority; the votes cast in Saigon, for example, exceeded the number of voters by over 150,000 votes.

¹⁹ G. Frederick Reinhardt, Telegram to Department of State, 29 June 1955, *FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam*, p. 474; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, p. 331 [redacted]

²⁰ Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, p. 332-333; CSHP 113, I, pp. 133-134; SAIG 8604, 23 September 1955; SAIG 8750, 6 October 1955; and SAIG 8810, 12 October 1955, all [redacted]

²¹ Currey, *Lansdale*, p. 180; Harwood interview, 27 March 1991. [redacted]

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But Harwood thought the result also reflected the government's inability to handle the mechanics of the project. There was at the time hardly any government presence at the village level, and therefore no machinery with which to distribute and count ballots. Nhu would come to meetings with Harwood "sputtering with frustration" over problems of the simplest logistics. In Harwood's view, even had the government wanted only to determine the popular will, it would have been reduced to guessing.²² []

A Strategy of Repression []

With the 23 October 1955 referendum and the proclamation of his presidency three days later, Diem created the formal basis for his assumption of power south of the 17th parallel. This left open the questions how he would exercise that authority, and, in the political realm, how his CIA advisors could help him extend and consolidate it. Both Stations saw the consent of the governed as indispensable to the new government's success. As we have seen, they consistently urged Diem and Nhu to move toward democratic institutions while reforming administrative practices. []

But early signs emerged of what Lansdale and Harwood both saw as a potentially destructive authoritarian style. As early as June 1955, the regular Station deplored the continued arrests of opposition leaders, which it feared would alienate those who, while not participating in the government, were also not resisting it. And little more than two months after the referendum, with the arrest of non-Communist opposition leader Dr. Phan Quang Dan, Lansdale complained that "the government is using force as a substitute for good leadership." He also seems to have given some credence to the claim of a Cao Dai contact that by February 1956 there were already 7,000 political prisoners in Saigon's Chi Hoa prison.²³ []

During this period, middle to late 1955, Diem launched his "denunciation of Communists" campaign. The Viet Minh cadres whom Hanoi had left in the South had as yet offered no overt resistance. But they were gradually replacing the French at the top of Diem's list of enemies. Consciously adopting Communist techniques, Diem set out, as one CIA officer later put it, to "get them before they get us." One way to do this was to stage mass meetings at which Diem's officials exhorted the villagers (the practice does not seem to have been common in the cities) to denounce Viet Minh cadres and sympathizers. Another was the widespread detention of known or suspected dissidents in a

²² Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, p. 334; Harwood interview, 27 March 1991; *Intervention*, p. 95. []

²³ SAIG 7125, 2 June 1955, [] SAIG 0275, 19 February 1956, *ibid.*, []

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program run by the Sureté, later called the Special Branch, of the National Police. Here also, the bulk of the arrests, and especially the more indiscriminate among them, seem to have taken place in the countryside. But the arrests of urban politicians that dismayed both Lansdale and Harwood presumably reflected the same policy.²⁴ [redacted]

The principal author of the propaganda aspect of the denunciation campaign was Diem's third Information Minister, Tran Chanh Thanh, a lawyer and former Viet Minh member. As Nhu's executive agent in the NRM, he was well known to the Station, with which he conducted the working-level liaison on NRM matters. The Station deplored Thanh's "Leninist" tendencies and held itself aloof from his denunciation campaign. Nor did the Station's intelligence liaison section support the Special Branch program of detaining suspected Communists. [redacted]

The regular Station seems to have been of two minds about regime activity against its actual and potential opponents. In late 1955, Harwood pointed out to Nhu the "apparent discrepancy between [the] democratic spirit" of Diem's proclamation announcing his ascension to the presidency and the "totalitarian spirit" of the denunciation campaign and other activity being run by ex-Viet Minh using Viet Minh methods. Harwood said he would like to believe that all this was a "temporary phenomenon" and that some thought was being given to the development of "political leaders with more democratic ideas."²⁶ [redacted]

Divergent Views and Divided Counsels [redacted]

Their common goal—the creation of a popular, representative government—did not prevent the Ngo brothers' CIA advisors from giving at least the appearance of divided counsels. As we have seen, Harwood and Headquarters

²⁴ Reporting from Hanoi on 24 November, the pro-Communist journalist Wilfred Burchett said that, on the 10th, Diem had convened a "Congress to Denounce Communists," and that the campaign was already in its "third phase" (see FBIS report, 29 November 1955, [redacted]; [redacted]; Caswell interview, 27 March 1991. For more information on the origins of the denunciation campaign, see Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 19, 26, 49; J.J. Zasloff, *Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954-1960: The Role of the Southern Vietminh Cadres* (RAND Corporation, May 1968), pp. 9-13. [redacted]

²⁵ Harwood interview, 16 May 1991; [redacted] Project Amendment, 10 February 1956 [redacted]

²⁶ Harwood interview, 27 March 1991; SAIG 9153, 9 November 1955, [redacted]

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agreed with Nhu on Diem's need for an organized base of electoral support. Lansdale, by contrast, continued to promote his vision of Diem as a Vietnamese George Washington, above any consideration of party or faction.

There is some evidence that Lansdale's chronic frustration with Diem was reciprocated. The differences in their political philosophies and personal styles probably affected Diem in much the same way they did Lansdale. General Tran Van Don, at one time chief of staff of the Vietnamese Army, observed that Diem had at first relied heavily on Lansdale, giving orders to put him through to Diem "night or day, whatever Diem was doing." Lansdale was of great assistance, Don thought, but he "went a little far when he tried to have Diem copy Magsaysay...this really hurt Diem's feelings." Late in 1955, not having seen Lansdale at the Palace in some time, Don asked about his absence. Diem answered, "Lansdale is too CIA and is an encumbrance. In politics there is no room for sentiment." Nevertheless, whether they had a genuine friendship, as Lansdale thought, or whether Diem saw their relationship in instrumental terms, as Vietnam desk officer John Caswell believed, Lansdale continued to enjoy regular if perhaps reduced access to the Palace. He was well aware, of course, that many of his prescriptions looked to Diem like unpleasant medicine.²⁷

Lansdale's convictions about the way to shape the new Vietnamese polity also led to a collision with the regular Station. In September 1955, having heard reports of political activity in the military, he cabled Headquarters that the Army was "deeply torn" by favoritism shown to NRM members in the officer corps. He had apparently not coordinated the message with the regular Station, and Headquarters instructed him to consult COS John Anderton.²⁸

Anderton did not acknowledge explicitly endorsing NRM organizational work in the Army, but took issue with Lansdale's claim that the NRM was corrupting the military. In any case, Ambassador Reinhardt had already asked him in June for a "priority effort" to build Diem a base of electoral support. Despite his argument with the regular Station on this subject, Lansdale did not learn about Reinhardt's instructions until late 1955 or early 1956. He protested to the Ambassador, who reacted "with a strange look" and told him that US

²⁷ Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War*, p. 60; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 159; Redick interview, 28 September 1989; Caswell interview, 27 February 1990.

²⁸ SAIG 8428, 10 September 1955, and 13 September 1955, *ibid.* Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, pp. 341-344. In his book, Lansdale consistently refers to the Can Lao in describing this controversy. Some of the regular Station's correspondence uses the cryptonym for the NRM when the context indicates the Can Lao is meant, and Douglas Blaufarb has said that there was confusion over the cryptonyms during his tenure as DCOS from 1956 to 1958 (see Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991). Overlapping leadership and activities probably account for the perennial confusion on this point.

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policy advocated building a "strong nationalist party" supporting Diem. Lansdale was outraged at not having been consulted and flew to Washington to argue his case there. He saw officials at all levels, including the Dulles brothers, who gave him the impression they regarded his views as "too visionary and idealistic." Concluding that his prospects of doing "constructive work [in Vietnam] seemed to be ending," Lansdale repeated his request of the previous summer for a transfer. This time, the Secretary of State refused even to consider it.²⁹ [redacted]

Neither station favored a politicized Vietnamese Army, but Lansdale and Anderton argued for months over the actual extent of NRM organizing among the military. In early March 1956, Harwood tacitly acknowledged undesirable political activity in the army, reporting that "at station demand," the NRM had suspended the training of political instructors for the army. Nhu and Diem had also responded to Harwood and Lansdale pressure by drafting a decree prohibiting political activity in the army. But Nhu continued to deny any NRM wrongdoing. He made it clear, furthermore, that while the army would ideally be free of partisan politics, the main thing had been to get Diem's candidates elected to the Constituent Assembly. Thus, it was only after the elections on 4 March 1956 that the Vietnamese acted on CIA's demands.³⁰ [redacted]

The NRM and a Strategic Dilemma [redacted]

Despite their disagreements about repression in the countryside and politics in the military, Harwood believed that Nhu harbored a genuine concern for the welfare of the peasantry and an equally real desire to create an efficient, equitable administration. Nhu might look on the people as "children," and he certainly doubted that Western political institutions could be reproduced in Vietnam, but Harwood thought he was looking to the US for "basic political philosophy and inspiration." Accordingly, the Station asked Headquarters in November 1955 to find people who could furnish "heavy and realistic indoctrination in Western political theory and practice" to NRM functionaries. As Harwood later recalled it, Headquarters never did adequately meet this ambitious requirement. [redacted]

²⁹ Memorandum, Chief FE Division [Aurell] to DCI [Dulles], "Clarification of CIA Assistance to Political Program in Support of Diem," 9 November 1955, [redacted]

[redacted] Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, pp. 342-345 [redacted]

³⁰ SAIG 0456, 4 March 1956, [redacted] SAIG 0516, 8 March 1956, [redacted] FVSA 2682, 17 April 1956, [redacted]

³¹ FVSA 1542; SAIG 9153, 9 November 1955, [redacted]

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At the same time, Harwood had to deal with the question of NRM participation in the denunciation campaign. In the fall of 1955, he explicitly opposed using the NRM for coercive purposes, telling Nhu that he would not support an expanded front controlled by totalitarian-minded leaders. Nhu insisted that both he and Diem shared Harwood's concerns and that the major obstacle to democratic development was the absence of a "living political doctrine" to guide the work of pro-Diem political forces, especially the NRM. Telling Headquarters about this session with Nhu, Harwood said he recognized that this was not the moment to press the Vietnamese for adherence to the tenets of Jeffersonian democracy. But he wanted to keep Nhu and Diem from abandoning "positive democratic goals," even at a time when other, more pressing, problems required "negative or repressive treatment." Apparently fearful that democratic values would continue to be overshadowed, Headquarters commented apprehensively, in early 1956, on signs of an "autocratic tendency" in the developing NRM.³² []

A little later, in March, Harwood came to see some merit in NRM participation in security matters. Defending the NRM against charges, apparently reported by Lansdale, of having usurped government authority in rural security programs, Harwood decried efforts to identify VC and other dissidents as part of the "civic duty" of any loyal Vietnamese. But apparently still uncomfortable with this NRM role in countersubversion, he added that he saw its program moving from anti-VC investigation and denunciation to encouraging village leaders to participate in social and economic projects.³³ []

This uneasy ambivalence over the strategic purpose of the NRM persisted. Both Stations were persuaded of the need for Diem to establish truly representative government. But they also, especially the regular Station, seemed to accept that a certain amount of more or less arbitrary repression in the countryside was needed, at least in the beginning, to keep sect dissidents and the Communist underground under control. Harwood's remarks are typical. The implicit assumption appears to have been that a judicious level of repression would not compromise the nation-building program and might even be a prerequisite to its success. No one, Vietnamese or American, seems to have feared that denunciations and non-judicial police action could produce disaffection that outweighed the damage done to the Viet Cong underground.³⁴ []

³² SAIG 9153, [] 16 January 1956, []

³³ SAIG 0456, 4 March 1956, []

³⁴ FVSA 1542, []

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Probably because there was nothing else to work with, the regular Station strengthened its endorsement of Headquarters' ambitions for the NRM in early 1956. A January dispatch from Headquarters speaks of the long-range objective of filling the political vacuum at the village level. But the Station was closer to the problem and better understood the obstacles. Harwood reported that the Station's ideas were "foreign...sometimes incomprehensible" to his contacts in the NRM, and it would be essential to insert a cadre of [redacted] indoctrinated Vietnamese if the organization were to develop along the lines that CIA desired.³⁵ [redacted]

Later in January, the NRM adopted a progressive platform for the elections to the constituent assembly. It included a bow to agrarian reform ("each peasant family should have land"), as well as provisions for "social insurance laws," public works, cooperatives, expanded education, and, probably at the instigation of Nhu's wife, equality of the sexes.³⁶ The problem was the disparity between promise and performance. Headquarters worried about the diversion of NRM members into paramilitary work and about coercive recruitment. If the situation could not be "clarified and improved," Headquarters warned, it might be necessary to withdraw Agency support.³⁷ [redacted]

As Ngo Dinh Diem approached the first anniversary of his victory in the battle for Saigon, the structure and style of his government had largely matured. Having boycotted the Geneva-mandated election preparations and dethroned Bao Dai, he had launched his bid to create a nation out of the territory below the 17th parallel. But as of early 1956, Diem showed as little interest in conciliating the non-Communist opposition as he did in making his rule attractive to the mass of the population. CIA, and apparently Ngo Dinh Nhu as well, agonized over the authoritarian bias of Diem's style. Even when the Station and Nhu agreed on policy goals, however, they were frustrated by the lack of competent, motivated people to organize and staff their political programs. Their dilemma reflected in part nothing more than the severe shortage of such people. But it resulted also from the adoption by the anti-colonialist, francophobe Diem of both the personnel and the style of governance of the departed French colonial administration. Most of the "anti-colonialist courageous honest men" whom Lansdale believed Diem to be seeking either stood aside or joined the Viet Cong. [redacted]

³⁵ SAIG 9761, 10 January 1956 and SAIG 0042, 31 January 1956, both [redacted]

³⁶ During his tour of duty, Harwood thought that Nhu's wife exercised little influence on policy. But she did nag Diem and Nhu with genuinely progressive ideas about the status of women, and occasionally wore down their resistance (see Harwood interview, 16 May 1990.) [redacted]

³⁷ Saigon Embassy Telegram 2963, 23 January 1956; [redacted] 23 January 1956; and [redacted] [redacted] 13 February 1956; all [redacted]

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CHAPTER 8

Making the Best of the Bargain

Personal charisma might have compensated to some extent for anachronistic policy and reliance on the colonial bureaucracy, but Ngo Dinh Diem's style did nothing to alleviate the problems that preoccupied the Station and Ngo Dinh Nhu. Although the Prime Minister's forays into Central Vietnam in early 1955 had appeared to generate some real popular enthusiasm, his withdrawn nature soon reasserted itself. As the referendum approached in September, Headquarters opined that failure to establish "essential rapport" with the people "was probably the most serious shortcoming of the Diem government." Implicitly recognizing the odds against getting Diem to make basic changes of either style or substance, Headquarters confined its suggestions to the minutiae of his rare public appearances. Accordingly, it urged Harwood to get Nhu to persuade Diem to eschew his customary white sharkskin suit in favor of Vietnamese dress. Trying another angle, Headquarters reacted to a United States Information Service (USIS) account of the the indifferent public response to an October trip by the new president through the Mekong Delta. Noting Diem's reported lack of rapport with the crowds, Headquarters lamely suggested that the Station arrange for him to get elocution lessons.¹

There was, of course, little prospect of improved rapport with the masses unless Diem attached some importance to it. But so far as Nhu was concerned, Diem was not merely indifferent to the techniques of crowd-pleasing, but lacked any understanding of "politics, politicians, or parties." Diem "felt that to rule it was enough to have an army and an administrative apparatus." Nhu insisted to the Station that he himself knew this was not enough.²

The continuing fragility of the government and the intransigence of its numerous opponents meant that if Diem was to have any chance of success, Agency and other American support had to continue even in the face of

¹ FVSW 1264, 30 September 1955; Foreign Service Dispatch 49, 14 October 1955; FVSW 1438, 29 November 1955; The Station's replies, if any, have not been found.

² Contact Report, Blaufarb and Nhu, 11 July 1956, attachment to FVSA 3460, n.d.,

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disagreement with him on issues of both style and substance. Thus, while admonishing Nhu about the dangers of authoritarianism in late 1955, [redacted]

[redacted] He began a training program for NRM officials and, trying to counter the current of neutralism in Southeast Asia, worked with Nhu and the local USIS office to install Information Ministry positions in various South Vietnamese embassies. He also secured the cooperation of the Embassy's labor officer in a program of support to Tran Quoc Buu's Vietnamese Confederation of Christian Workers.³ [redacted]

Lansdale, meanwhile, used his access to Diem to urge the creation of representative institutions—especially a constitution guaranteeing an independent legislature and judiciary—that he thought essential to ensuring the government's success. Diem's usual reply to these entreaties claimed sympathy for the idea, while emphasizing the need for unfettered executive authority for a government with so many enemies.⁴ [redacted]

To his concern for the health of Vietnamese institutions Lansdale added a lively interest in the Saigon government's international reputation. Discovering in early 1956 that Joseph Manciewicz was planning a film version of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, he contrived an introduction when the producer visited Saigon. Lansdale proposed transforming Greene's essentially anti-American treatment into a success story [redacted]

[redacted] Lansdale's Station then got Diem to authorize the government's cooperation in the filming.⁵ [redacted]

During this period, Lansdale's advocacy continued to aim at opinion in official Washington. As he had fought for endorsement of the Diem government almost a year earlier, he now undertook to win support for Diem's opposition to all-Vietnam elections. As we have seen, both stations had supported Diem's reluctance to participate in election preparations. Now, the President wanted to repudiate the process entirely. Lansdale proposed a propaganda line designed to get South Vietnam and the US off the hook: if the North really wanted a political solution, he wrote, it should first demobilize its Army. Headquarters liked this uncompromising approach and found a sympathetic

³ FVSA 2964, 25 May 1956, [redacted]

⁴ Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, chapter 18; Clandestine Service Historical Paper (CSHP) 113, *The Saigon Military Mission, June 1954 to December 1956, October 1970, Vol. I*, chap. 10. [redacted]

⁵ [redacted] FVSA 3280, 2 July 1956, [redacted]

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audience for it at the State Department, where Kenneth Young, Director for Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs, volunteered to take it up with the interagency Special Coordinating Committee on covert activity.⁶

The result was guidance for the country team drafted by State, USIS, and CIA. The outcome would probably have been the same without Lansdale's intervention, but his forcing the issue produced an earlier and perhaps more unequivocal policy decision than might otherwise have emerged. Although Lansdale was always reticent about what he told Diem of his own role in the policymaking process, one may infer that the outcome also helped reinforce his role as confidant and informal channel to Washington.⁷

Popular Government vs. Executive Authority

Of the issues that preoccupied CIA in Saigon in early 1956, only that of reunification elections found the Agency and Diem in full agreement. Other issues brought into sharp focus the differences between the Vietnamese and American approaches to the kind of government that should rule the South. One of these was the formation of a national assembly, the other, the process of drafting and promulgating a new constitution.

Although all four parties—the Ngo brothers and the separate CIA stations—regarded an elected assembly as essential, the Americans placed a considerably higher value on the integrity of the voting process. As early as January 1956, the regular Station was reporting its concern that Diem would rig the elections scheduled for March. Harwood urged Nhu to keep them "fair and free." Nhu explicitly agreed not to censor campaign materials and guaranteed the integrity of the secret ballot. But he complained about the self-aggrandizing opposition and told Harwood about organizing "formerly anti-government thugs...on behalf of [the] NRM in case of VC or sect electoral violence." Apparently accepting the rationale for this, Harwood added that Nhu was "handling this himself since it [is] highly sensitive and must be done properly."⁸

⁶ SAIG 9281, 14 January 1956; 19 January 1956;

⁷ 1 February 1956, *ibid.* Lansdale's book says he argued the matter personally with the Dulles brothers in early 1956, when the Secretary of State seemed to take for granted that the elections would be held; Mr. Dulles's response is not described. (See *In the Midst of Wars*, p. 345.)

⁸ SAIG 9717, 6 January 1956, and SAIG 9839, 16 January 1956; Contact Report, Harwood and Nhu, 7 February 1956, attachment to FVSA 2391, 9 March 1956,

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The elections were in fact manipulated, but not to Nhu's satisfaction, despite the election of NRM candidates to a majority of assembly seats. He deplored the irregularities, in Harwood's view, less out of respect for the sanctity of the ballot than because of their results: rigging by local officials had defeated several candidates whom Nhu wanted as part of a new national leadership cadre. But these were mostly people from the North, running in Saigon and the Delta, where local officials had seen to it that at least some of the carpetbaggers were defeated. [REDACTED]

Incipient differences over the structure of the new government that lurked in discussions of the elections became clear in the drafting of a constitution. The main actor on the CIA side was Ed Lansdale. In August 1955, apparently acting on his own authority, he had brought to Saigon a Filipino journalist and constitutional scholar named Juan Orendain who he thought might influence Diem to adopt the system of divided powers that the Philippines had borrowed from the United States. Hoping to attract Diem's non-Communist competitors into participation in government, Lansdale saw an independent legislature and judiciary as indispensable to relieving their doubts about Diem's good faith. Diem, whom Harwood saw as preoccupied with establishing unconditional personal authority, wanted no part of either.¹⁰ [REDACTED]

Orendain persisted, and some of his prescriptions seem to have found their way into the draft submitted by Diem's constitutional commission. But Diem scrapped the draft in April 1956 and invited Orendain to consult with him directly on the "basic principles" he had decided to present to the assembly in lieu of a draft text. As Orendain reported it, Diem's main concern was to be assured of "all executive powers" he needed at the "present time." Lansdale later credited Orendain with "almost singlehandedly drawing up a constitution," but Joe Redick, his interpreter and executive officer, thought Agency influence to have been slight, given the divergence between Orendain's recommendations and the final product.¹¹ [REDACTED]

The regular Station's detachment cannot have helped to advance Lansdale's case with Diem. During June and July, while Orendain tried unsuccessfully to talk Diem into agreeing to an effective separation of powers, with an autonomous National Assembly, Deputy Chief of Station (DCOS) Douglas Blaufarb

⁹ Interview with Paul Harwood, 27 March 1991; [REDACTED] 6 March 1956, attachment to FVSA 2682, 17 April 1956, [REDACTED]

¹⁰ CSHP 113, I, pp. 133-134; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, chap. 18; Harwood interview, 27 March 1991. [REDACTED]

¹¹ Project Status Report, August 1955, [REDACTED] SAIG 0955, 19 April 1956, [REDACTED] Lansdale interview, 6 January 1964, [REDACTED] Redick interview, 4 December 1963, [REDACTED]

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stood aside. He had no Headquarters mandate to get involved and believed that Lansdale did. In fact, no one had encouraged either Station to concern itself with this. FE Division's covert action chief, [] worried both about the authority for the advice Lansdale was giving Orendain and about its competence: CIA had no charter to shape the Vietnamese constitution, and Headquarters lacked detailed information on the Lansdale/Orendain recommendations. A member of Lansdale's Station, being debriefed around mid-1956, assured Headquarters that Lansdale kept in touch with Ambassador Reinhardt, who was providing what guidance he could despite inadequate instructions from the Department. This may have served to resolve Headquarters' doubts; [] at any rate, seems not to have followed up with any questions or guidance to Lansdale.¹² []

The Saigon Government as Intelligence Target []

As Diem's rigidity and his government's weaknesses became more evident, the regular Station—Lansdale did not believe in formal, controlled agent relationships—began to supplement its liaison programs with unilateral efforts designed to circumvent Palace obstructionism.¹³ One of Harwood's men, [] took out the first insurance policy in April 1956 by recruiting [] [] "as the Diem family dictatorship developed, [] came more and more frequently into conflict with the family's determination to absorb all control to itself." []

[] Despite [] quarrels with Nhu and Diem, [] managed to retain their confidence and became an important if sometimes self-interested source on the inner workings of the family and the government.¹⁴ []

¹² Undated, unsigned transcript of the debriefing of [] [] FVSA 3280, 2 July 1956, [] SAIG 1591, 23 June 1956, [] Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991. []

¹³ Lansdale saw source motivation in terms of shared ideals: "The strongest control is one that is self-imposed; it is based upon mutual trust and the awakening of unselfish patriotism on ideals or principles we ourselves cherish...the foreign person or groups serve our own best national interests by serving their own highest national interests, which coincide with ours." CSHP 113, II, 26. []

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[] reporting included one of the most obscure aspects of the Diem administration, the role of Diem's youngest brother, Ngo Dinh Can, as de facto governor of Central Vietnam. Almost a year earlier, one of Diem's closest American contacts, Wesley Fishel of the US public administration team, had listened to Diem's almost surreal denial that Can had sponsored assassination teams. Now came reporting in mid-1956 [] on efforts by Can to displace both Nhu and Information Minister Tran Chanh Thanh as the principal power behind the throne. It became increasingly evident that Saigon's control of allegedly nationwide programs, including some supported by CIA, extended only to the edge of Can's territory. This applied as much to civic action and intelligence operations against the Viet Cong as it did to political organizing by the NRM and the Can Lao.¹⁵ []

Nhu recognized the problem and often discussed it with Harwood. He claimed that Diem understood both the advantages and the disadvantages of Can's suzerainty in Central Vietnam but refused to curb him. The Embassy would importune Harwood to get the Palace to do something about Can, but Nhu, informed of the complaint, would only throw up his hands. Harwood later thought of the perennial tension over Can's role as symptomatic of the shortage of political and managerial talent willing to serve the regime. Diem used what he could find and simply ignored what must have looked to him like mere caviling from the Americans.¹⁶ []

The Appearance of Progress []

When Paul Harwood left Vietnam in April 1956, he was pessimistic about the government's long-term prospects. Efforts at institution-building were foundering for lack of qualified, motivated people: "We got nowhere." In June, Diem took a step that Lansdale, whom he did not consult, later saw as catastrophic. In an effort to strengthen central government control, Diem abolished the traditional system of locally-constituted village councils, replacing them with committees appointed by his district and province chiefs. In doing

¹⁵ Diem's tortured defense of Can against rumored sponsorship of assassination squads sheds some light on the president's mental processes. According to Diem, General Hinh (exiled in late 1954 for conspiring with the French against him) spread the assassination rumor "not because Can had organized such squads, but because Hinh was afraid that if someone asked Can whether he should organize an assassination squad, Can might say yes, and since if he did say yes, my brother would give explicit advice as to how to go about it, General Hinh was afraid. But you may be sure that Can has never done anything of the sort." Memorandum, Wesley Fishel to Ambassador Reinhardt, "Gouvernement en Famille," n.d., attached to FVSW 1133, 5 August 1955. []

[] debriefing of [] 7 June 1956, []

debriefing of [] 23 October 1956, []

FVSA 3748, 28 September 1956, []

¹⁶ Harwood interview, 27 March 1991, []

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this, he went counter to Lansdale's repeated urging to increase the representative character of local elections. Lansdale found Diem's secretiveness a "mystery," but in retrospect it seems obvious that Diem, familiar with Lansdale's views, decided simply to avoid argument by keeping his own counsel.¹⁷

Harwood's replacement, Douglas Blaufarb, also had to face the perennial question of the dearth of competent people. In September, Nhu told him in an excess of candor that the NRM would collapse in short order were it not supported by the government. Nhu pointed to the central committee, saying that the nonentities comprising it included "some undoubted crooks." He was perhaps less candid in trying to account for this phenomenon. When Diem founded the NRM in the fall of 1954, he said, "all the sound nationalist elements were already involved in other parties; no talent was left over for NRM cadres." Left unacknowledged and unexplored was the Ngo brothers' failure to attract that talent into the service of the new government.¹⁸

Blaufarb turned out to be even more skeptical than Harwood about the prospects that covert action might succeed in drawing the population into support of the government. He saw Diem and Nhu as convinced that the regime was "hanging by a thread," threatened not only by the Viet Cong but even by the "ejected French and the beaten and dispersed sects." Blaufarb thought Diem and Nhu knew better, even while they allowed "these feelings of insecurity and suspicion" to lead them into harassing the press, politicizing the Army, and turning the legislature into a Palace dependency. Like Harwood, he saw Diem and Nhu as paternalistic and condescending toward their compatriots. Nhu, the more politically liberal of the two, probably believed that "'democratic' requirements are met if the masses can be manipulated legally, without force... by the central committee of puppeteers."¹⁹

Despite his skepticism, Blaufarb continued working with Nhu on a formula for political organization. In early October, he and Nhu agreed that a reorganization of the NRM and intensified training of its officials might compensate for the prevalence of "low-caliber dregs, many with shady pasts which they were trying to live down by joining a Diem group." At the same time Blaufarb was exploring the potential of the Can Lao, Nhu's semi-secret cadre party—which Headquarters thought had at least the advantages of better people and "a fairly inspiring doctrine."²⁰ In late October, Headquarters concluded that the NRM could not fill "the political vacuum at the village level." In December, rivalry between the Central Vietnam and Cochin China factions forced the

¹⁷ Harwood interview, 11 September 1990; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, p. 356.

¹⁸ Report of Blaufarb meeting with Nhu, 28 September 1956, attached to FVSA 3918, 5 October 1956,

¹⁹ FVSA 3647, 7 September 1956,

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postponement of a planned NRM convention, leaving the organization in a "floundering and feuding condition." The Station reacted by suspending its support.²¹



C/FE Al Ulmer, President Diem.

Suspension was made easier by a simultaneous change of climate at Headquarters with respect to covert political action. Late in 1956, FE Division chief Al Ulmer visited Saigon. The burden of his message, as Joe Redick later recalled it, was that the era of free-wheeling improvisation was over, and that CIA in Saigon would begin operating like a normal station, with more emphasis on intelligence collection. This mandate was followed in December 1956 by the departure of Ed Lansdale and the dissolution of his Station. Some of his activities were absorbed by the Station, some were entrusted to the Embassy's foreign aid section and USIS, and some were terminated.²²

²⁰ Nhu had borrowed from the teachings of Emmanuel Mounier, a French Catholic philosopher of the early 20th century, to formulate a theory he called "personalism." He then proclaimed this the theoretical basis of the Can Lao Party. Not coherent enough to be readily summarized, personalism seems to have represented an effort by Nhu to reconcile the idea of individual freedom with the perceived need, in a developing country, for willing submission to an authoritarian state.

²¹ FVSA 3919, 8 October 1956, attachment to FVSA 4085, n.d.,

FVSA 4556, 8 January 1957,

²² Redick interview, 28 September 1989; CSHP 113, I and II, passim.

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Lansdale had enjoyed little success in persuading Ngo Dinh Diem to treat the consent of the governed as a fundamental goal of his administration. His efforts to unify the organization and management of the US Mission's rural programs also bore little fruit, partly because of his difficulty—one that he himself acknowledged—in persuading his superiors that he was keeping them fully informed. But he had made two crucial contributions, first when he intervened in the debate with Washington that produced its commitment to Diem in May 1955, and second when he served as honest broker in the suspicion-ridden negotiations between Diem and the religious sects. And his groundbreaking work on unified rural programs anticipated by ten years the assimilation of such activity under the aegis of the US Military Assistance Command/Vietnam.²³

As 1956 drew to a close, CIA officers trying to help the government attract the active loyalty of its citizens saw little reason for optimism. But Diem had at this point made substantial progress in establishing his authority. With vigorous and effective help from the US, and especially from the CIA, he had eliminated the immediate threats to his survival. With the French gone and the sects under control, he had begun expanding the area under his authority. He had created a national assembly and promulgated a constitution, and the date set for reunification elections had passed without a reaction from the North.

Amid all this, there was still no significant armed resistance from the Viet Cong. Indeed, despite the frustration of its hopes for reunification, Hanoi decided in late 1956 to continue the "political struggle" in the South, concentrating on building its party organization while trying to prepare the ground for revolution. The Diem government thus entered 1957 with no serious competition for control in the South. In these circumstances, there seemed to be time for the US to try to moderate the regime's drift toward arbitrary rule. There was, in any case, no candidate to replace Diem; in that respect, nothing had changed since his accession to office. But the problems had changed, and these changes were reflected in the approach to the Palace taken by the newly unified CIA Station.²⁴

²³ Interview with Evan Parker, 8 March 1991; State Department interview with Lansdale, 6 September 1984.

²⁴ Race, *War Comes to Long An*, pp. 73–81. Race describes the controversial decision to persist with "political struggle" as it was promulgated in a document, apparently written by Lao Dong Party Central Committee member Le Duan, called "The Path of the Revolution in the South." For the Station's attitude, see Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991.

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~~SECRET//X1~~**CHAPTER 9***A More Qualified Commitment*

Nicholas Natsios, who became Chief of Station (COS) when John Anderton departed in early spring 1957, took a more active interest in intelligence collection than in covert action. This predilection was encouraged by FE Division Chief Al Ulmer's desire to have the newly unified Station concentrate on genuinely covert operations. In any case, the atmosphere of crisis that drove the freewheeling programs of Edward Lansdale and Paul Harwood had receded. Having met the initial challenges to his survival in office, Diem now confronted the more intractable long-range problems of what soon came to be called nation-building. In this new atmosphere Natsios could adopt a relatively detached stance, concentrating more on illuminating the workings of the regime than on helping it against its adversaries.¹

As COS, Natsios inherited not only the contact with Nhu, but also direct access to the President. Anderton had given him to understand that this relationship remained unknown to the Embassy, although Headquarters had revealed it to the State Department by August 1956. Unaware of this, and dubious about the propriety of a concealed channel to Diem, Natsios declared it to Elbridge Durbrow when he arrived as Ambassador in March 1957. He offered to advise the Ambassador of prospective meetings, and to bow out of anything that Durbrow wanted to handle himself.²

The record reflects no concrete results from the Anderton relationship with Diem. Natsios' move thus achieved real gains in his relationship with the Ambassador at no visible cost in influence on Diem. Natsios continued to see Diem on ad hoc issues; one that arose in July 1957 was that of an open limousine that the President wanted the Station to buy for him. Headquarters objected—CIA had already furnished him one limousine—but Durbrow

¹ Evan J. Parker, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, Potomac, MD, 8 March 1991, tape recording (hereafter cited as Parker interview, 8 March 1991); Natsios interview, 6 March 1991. Parker was Chief of FE Division's Southeast Asia Branch from 1953 to 1958.

² Natsios interview, 6 March 1991; Vernet L. Gresham, Memorandum, "Colonel Edward Lansdale," 27 August 1956, Lansdale personnel file.

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COS Nick Natsios, President Diem. (C)



From left, DDCI Charles Cabell, Nick Natsios, Ambassador Durbrow, DDP official Tracy Barnes, GVN interpreter (photos courtesy of Nick Natsios).

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pushed the idea, and a suitably appointed Cadillac was eventually delivered. Blaufarb accompanied the President on a test drive around the Palace grounds, and Diem, seated in the rear, nearly joined him in the front when the driver stepped too briskly on the unfamiliar power brakes.³ []

Natsios also introduced what Blaufarb later described as an "absolutist" approach to clandestine sources: if they hadn't signed on the dotted line, they couldn't be trusted, and the Station wasn't going to use them. Natsios agreed that he had seen the Station as too dependent on casual informants; to correct this he began a search for potential agents that began with contacts []

[]⁴ []

Ceremonial Visits to Washington []

Despite Natsios' detachment, the Station continued trying to help Ngo Dinh Nhu find a political formula that would bind the peasants to their government. It also went on serving as his channel to the US Government. In this role, it organized his visit to Washington in March 1957, paying around-the-world air fare for him and his wife. Although Nhu held no official position, Headquarters succeeded in arranging a short meeting with President Eisenhower in addition to sessions with the Secretaries of State and Defense and DCI Allen Dulles, plus calls on influential Senators.⁵ []

Nhu had no requests to make of CIA. DDP Frank Wisner, hosting a lunch, urged him to intensify South Vietnamese collection on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and suggested that he run such operations through Laos and Cambodia. Wisner also urged a larger effort to debrief refugees and interrogate prisoners.⁶ []

Wisner had described to the DCI Nhu's use of the semicovert Can Lao party to control the government and said he hoped the visit might give Nhu a clearer understanding of the US political system. Wisner does not, however, appear to have expressed any concern to Nhu about the Saigon government's authoritarian style; the record says only that he told Nhu how greatly he admired the leadership displayed by President Ngo "during this difficult time."⁷ []

³ Natsios interview, 6 March 1991; Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991; [] Memorandum for the Record, "Gift of Open Linousine to President Diem," 30 July 1957, []
[] Fiche 18, passim. []

⁴ Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991; Natsios interview, 6 March 1991. []

⁵ Chief FE Division, Memorandum for Deputy Director for Plans, "Visit to Washington of Ngo Dinh Nhu," 12 March 1957, [] 5 April 1957, []

⁶ [] 10 April 1957, *ibid.* []

⁷ Chief, Far East Division, Memorandum for the DCI, "Visit to Washington of Ngo Dinh Nhu," 22 March 1957, filed *ibid.*; Philip Potter, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting Between DDP and Ngo Dinh Nhu, 4 April 1957," 18 April 1957, filed *ibid.* []

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Nhu made an excellent personal impression. Headquarters later told the field that people who had known him earlier thought he had "increased immeasurably in poise and self-confidence." The only sour note was struck by Madame Nhu, who created difficulties that Headquarters said it intended to address in a separate dispatch. With that exception, Headquarters thought the trip highly successful. Years later, the Nhus' escort officer, Paul Harwood, could recall only that Madame Nhu had reveled in the attention paid her by Allen Dulles and various notables from the State and Defense Departments at a dinner the DCI hosted at the Alibi Club on H Street in Washington. She exploited her good looks, vivacity, and command of English to become the star of the evening. Nhu was unhappy with her performance, although in Harwood's view she was "not a problem, but a sensation."⁸



Madame Nhu (photo courtesy of Nick Natsios).

Upon Nhu's departure, preparations began for a visit by President Diem. Edward Lansdale, now at the Pentagon, contacted CIA's Vietnam desk to suggest that Diem be invited to address a joint session of Congress. Lansdale had a friend, Nick Arundel of the United Press, whom he could ask to approach

⁸ FVSW 3462, 9 May 1957, Paul Harwood, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, McLean, VA, 9 October 1991 (hereafter cited as Harwood interview, 9 October 1991). Headquarters' list of complaints about Madame Nhu has not been found.

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Diem backers such as Senators Mike Mansfield (D-MT) and John F. Kennedy (D-MA). Diem was in fact invited to Capitol Hill, shortly after his 8 May arrival.⁹

DCI Allen Dulles visited Diem at Blair House. An FE Division briefing paper for the DCI noted that, for more than a year, CIA had been pushing for a reorganized South Vietnamese intelligence effort. But Diem, while agreeing in principle, seemed "afraid to place too much responsibility in the hands of one man," and progress had been slight. Al Ulmer noted for DDP Frank Wisner that Diem displayed "little personal inclination" toward democratic practice, and that the Can Lao, headed by Nhu, effectively dominated the government.¹⁰

Although they had few illusions about the popularity of Diem's rule, senior Agency officials spared the President any direct criticism during his visit. Still admiring his success in overcoming the anarchic conditions of 1954, they greeted Diem as the hero of a story to which no one had expected a happy ending. The Station and the Vietnam desk at Headquarters might fret about the Saigon government's apparent indifference to the consent of the governed, but there was general agreement in Washington, shared by CIA, that Diem had succeeded in stabilizing the South, and that the war had been won. In any case, the Eisenhower administration was preoccupied with the aftermath of the Suez crisis and the Hungarian uprising of late 1956, and in a mood to look on the bright side of developments in Vietnam.¹¹

Working Both Sides of the Street

The Station had only Vietnam to worry about, and both Natsios and Blaufarb were less optimistic than Washington about the Ngo brothers' ability to solidify their political base. Neither was predicting disaster. Both, however, were concerned about Diem's style. This prevented him from co-opting opposition politicians—themselves "conspiratorial to a fault," in Blaufarb's view—and from inspiring the loyalty of the rural population. Diem's lack of charisma was by now notorious in the US Mission, where it was common to joke about Vietnam's need for a "Mag Van Say."¹²

⁹ The subject is discussed in a series of informal notes between officers in the Southeast Asia Branch, beginning 8 April 1957.

¹⁰ Chief, Far East Division, Memorandum for the DCI, "Visit to Washington of Ngo Dinh Diem," 22 March 1957.

¹¹ Caswell interview, 4 January 1991; Parker interview, 8 March 1991. Caswell later came to believe that the extent of Saigon's apparent control, judged as it usually was by the low rate of Communist-inspired incidents, was largely an illusion created by Hanoi's self-imposed restraint.

¹² Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991. Ramon Magsaysay had defeated the Huk insurgency while serving as Secretary of National Defense and was President of the Philippines from 1953 until his death in 1957.

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In this atmosphere, the Station worked not just to penetrate the government and its VC adversaries but to build bridges to the anti-Communist opposition. [redacted] signed an agreement formalizing his recruitment of a year earlier. In May, during Diem's welcome to Washington, the Station was telling a disaffected [redacted] official that the Americans wanted to prevent the emergence of a dictator like Korea's Syngman Rhee. Support to the Vietnamese opposition would have to be clandestine, however, to avoid "endangering South Vietnam's position as an anti-Commie bulwark in Southeast Asia." Penetration of the [redacted] proceeded when Blaufarb recruited [redacted] disenchanted with Ngo Dinh Nhu.¹³ [redacted]

In July, Headquarters described [redacted] importance in terms of his potential as [redacted] opposition to the government. Although the Station was not explicitly searching for a replacement for Diem—perhaps only because there seemed to be no candidates—a Station officer returning to Headquarters at that time appealed for an additional officer to help make contacts in the opposition. The idea was to spot "clean people...pull them together, select the best potential leaders, and then build them up—all behind Nhu's back."¹⁴ [redacted]

The search for a genuine anti-Communist opposition accompanied a new surge of the recurring CIA impulse to popularize the regime. The long-postponed NRM convention took place in May 1957, but its proceedings "evoked little interest or discussion." Ngo Dinh Can increased his influence when one of his lieutenants was elected President and other people from the North and the Center were named to the Central Committee. Nevertheless, the Station saw some hope in the very fact that the convention took place [redacted]

[redacted]¹⁵ [redacted]

The Station and Headquarters had always seemed somewhat polarized on the subject of the NRM. Only a little more than a year earlier, Headquarters had been the main proponent of a major role for the NRM, while Paul Harwood emphasized its limited potential. Now, however, it reacted skeptically to the Station's new optimism, writing in mid-summer that the NRM leadership seemed to feel no responsibility to the masses, and that it used the organization

¹³ FVSA-5280, 24 April 1957, [redacted] FVSA 5509, n.d., [redacted] 9 May 1957, [redacted] Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991, [redacted]

¹⁴ Unsigned memorandum, [redacted] Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991; unsigned memorandum of debriefing of [redacted] 10 July 1957, [redacted]

¹⁵ FVSA 5658, 25 June 1957, [redacted]

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simply as an instrument of control. The NRM's ills therefore looked impervious to an approach that addressed only the state of training. More basically, in Headquarters' view, Diem's standing with his people would henceforth "depend more on the success of his programs than upon propaganda."¹⁶

The Station did not reply to this until December, at which time Blaufarb displayed uneasy ambivalence about the prospects of working with Nhu to improve the regime's image. He seemed to accept Nhu's claim that the focus of NRM activity had already shifted from propaganda to rural organization and community development. Although Nhu thought immediate political liberalization would lead to disaster, the Station saw the NRM as "pointed in a democratic direction" and seemed to entertain some hope that it might help create the politically mature, responsible peasantry that Nhu saw as a prerequisite for democracy.

On the other hand, the Station noted the movement's rivalries and general incompetence. Like his predecessors Lansdale and Harwood, Blaufarb was faced with the absence of alternatives. He concluded, rather tentatively, that resumed CIA support to the NRM would be a "constructive element," adding that his help was intended mainly to create access to otherwise inaccessible information and to people susceptible to recruitment.¹⁷

Blaufarb's skepticism about political action resources included the Can Lao as well as the NRM and the ruling family. At one time hopeful that it could exploit the Can Lao's superior discipline for covert political action, the Station now believed that the party functioned only to "secure and broaden the regime's hold on the elements of power." Blaufarb suspected that its misdeeds included murder and was sure it directed "trickery and deceit" at the US Government. He accepted as sincere Nhu's protestations of desire for political freedom, but he added that "if anyone is deluded, it is Nhu himself, in his conception of...the family's magisterially guiding the faltering steps of the Vietnamese people" until they were ready for freedom. Blaufarb wondered if Nhu realized how much he enjoyed his own power and speculated that both Nhu and Diem might persuade themselves that "Ngo family paternalism is still what the people really need and want," with democracy reserved for an ever-receding tomorrow.¹⁸

Problems of Cooperation in Collection Against the Communists

The Station had no alternative to Nhu as a partner in internal political action but continually tried to find a substitute for him as a partner in intelligence

¹⁶ FVSW 3883, n.d., *ibid.*

¹⁷ FVSA 6915, 31 December 1957,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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work against the Communists. As of late 1957, the main instrument of this liaison, which as we have seen got off to an abortive beginning in November 1954, was still SEPES, the intelligence arm of Nhu's Can Lao Party. Its early staff included some of the people Paul Harwood sent [redacted] for training in 1954, but results had always been disappointing. This was mainly because Diem and Nhu devoted more of SEPES's resources to the non-Communist opposition than they did to the Viet Cong and North Vietnam.¹⁹ [redacted]

That had not been the understanding when the Agency agreed in the summer of 1955 to support operations against North Vietnam: SEPES was supposed to be targeted against "anti-government groups in Vietnam" only when the "sensitive nature of the activity precludes handling through the normal security services." On this somewhat amorphous basis, CIA budgeted [redacted] for SEPES for the year ending 31 August 1956. But it became clear that the organization was "not primarily an espionage service." It did indeed have as one responsibility counterespionage against "Viet Cong elements," but this was only one mandate on a list that included the vetting of new Can Lao members, political action, "suppression of anti-party activity, [and] covert collection of party funds."²⁰ [redacted]

The diversion of resources to party interests was aggravated by the Vietnamese reluctance to permit working level CIA participation in such operations against the North as SEPES found time to run. Darwin Curtis, in charge of the Station's SEPES liaison, noted both the lack of cooperation by the Vietnamese and the evidence that they were "incapable of mounting successful medium or high-level operations against targets in the DRV." Only 29 of 219 SEPES staffers worked in the External Operations Bureau targeted on the DRV, and just two of these had persuaded Curtis of their professional competence. But he did not want the liaison abolished as "over 50 percent of the [intelligence] we collect on the DRV comes from SEPES sources," most of this from the refugee debriefing center in Quang Tri.²¹ [redacted]

¹⁹ Saigon Station officer [redacted]

[redacted] Darwin O'R. Curtis, "senior member of the Saigon Station team handling liaison with the Vietnamese Intelligence Service," Memorandum for the Record, "Evaluation of the CIA liaison with the Service des Etudes Politiques et Sociales (SEPES), a Foreign Intelligence Service of the Government of Vietnam...for the period March 1956 through May 1958," n.d., [redacted]

²⁰ SEPES Project Outline, 26 September 1955, [redacted]

²¹ Darwin O'R. Curtis, Memorandum for the Record, "Evaluation of the CIA liaison with the Service des Etudes Politiques et Sociales (SEPES), a Foreign Intelligence Service of the Government of Vietnam (GVN) for the period March 1956 through May 1958." [redacted]

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In December 1957, Natsios seized on a remark by Tran Trung Dung, Diem's deputy in the Defense Ministry, to try to end the Station's dependence on SEPES for joint penetration operations against the Communists. CIA had begun supporting a modest program of harassing attacks on coastal facilities in the North. According to Dung, Diem expected the second phase of this activity to emphasize intelligence collection. Declining to take the security risk inherent in employing the same agents in both guerrilla operations and collection activity, Natsios suggested a separate program employing new agent personnel. To his dismay, Diem approved the idea only after sending Dung to discuss it with Nhu. But Natsios decided he could accept Nhu's potential for interference. Diem's cooperative chief of unconventional warfare, Colonel Le Quang Tung, would be running the program, and Natsios thought that Nhu would stay away from operations and be "satisfied with just determining policy."²²

There is no record that this initiative ever led to significant results; Colonel Tung was first and foremost a Diem loyalist and displayed no inclination to stretch his charter to gratify the Americans. The pattern of a grudging commitment from Diem or Nhu followed by working-level evasion or outright non-feasance repeated itself in CIA's dealings with all the potential Vietnamese partners in intelligence operations against the Communists.

The most promising of these arrangements involved the Sureté, later called the Special Branch of the National Police. Holding the principal charter for both intelligence and police action against the indigenous Viet Cong, the Sureté was the domestic counterpart to the foreign intelligence service nominally represented by SEPES.

But this seems to have produced no leads to penetrations of the Communist organization—
—nor did it set the stage for joint operations.

Meanwhile, Diem's security apparatus, presumably led by the police, pursued the suppression of suspected Viet Minh cadres and sympathizers under the "Anti-Communist Denunciation" rubric. Intelligence was neither a purpose nor a product of this exercise, or if it was, the Vietnamese concealed this from the Station. The result was that in late 1959, when the insurgency began to threaten Diem's hold on the countryside, most of such information as the Sureté provided to its Agency advisors was coming from casual, low-level informants.

²² FVSA 6642, 31 December 1957,

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Another potential partner was the Military Security Service (MSS) headed by General Mai Huu Xuan, a police functionary under the French whom Diem retained, apparently with some hesitation, for his experience in security work. Despite Palace doubts about Xuan's loyalty, Ed Lansdale vigorously courted him in 1955 and 1956. Upon Lansdale's departure the regular Station took over the effort to negotiate a working relationship with the MSS, whose charter called for counterintelligence support to the Vietnamese Army. Xuan agreed to an unspecified program of cooperation in September 1956, but in December disclaimed having the authority to share intelligence. COS John Anderton appealed to Diem, and in early January 1956 Xuan acknowledged having received the green light. The Station then waited another year and a half to get Diem's agreement in principle to joint operations. Even then the MSS disappointed its Station contacts as the locus of a common endeavor to penetrate the Communist apparatus.²³ []

During most of this period, from mid-1955 to late 1956, the two Stations pursued sporadic consultations with Diem and Nhu over the structure of a revised military intelligence organization. The brothers' expressed interest in such advice and their periodic approvals of joint collection activity renewed CIA hopes of fruitful cooperation even as working level efforts led to little or no results. The Agency had, indeed, little choice but to try working with the Vietnamese in the search for agent candidates. But in retrospect, it seems that the Ngo brothers' compulsively secretive cast of mind always prevailed over any impulse to exploit to mutual advantage the advice and support pressed on them by CIA.²⁴ []

The regular Station had already identified the syndrome that doomed to frustration all efforts at productive cooperation in the areas of intelligence and internal security. In mid-1955, Paul Harwood reported conversations with Ngo Dinh Nhu and Information Minister and ex-Viet Minh Tran Chanh Thanh. Citing Thanh's preoccupation with protecting the NRM, the Can Lao's front organization, from "saboteurs" and "provocateurs [from] other political parties" as well as from the Viet Cong, Harwood acknowledged that Nhu agreed

²³ FVSA 2391, 9 March 1956, []

[] FVSA 3947, 15 October 1956, FVSA 4666, 22 January 1957, and FVSA 5844, 22 July 1957, []

[] In his book, Lansdale recounts the bizarre episode in which, persuaded of imminent danger to the person and family of General Xuan, he arranged for the latter to be given safehaven, [] The exercise turned into an administrative nightmare which further strained Lansdale's always-tense relationship with CIA's Far East Division. See Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, pp. 148-49. []

²⁴ SAIG 7017, 24 April 1955, filed [] FVSA 2391, 9 March 1956, []

[] FVSW 1959, 28 March 1956, []

[] FVSA 2989, 26 May 1956, []

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on the need to entrust the security function to something other than the NRM "secret service." But in Harwood's view,

Their past experience and political education, having taken place as it did in a climate of [colonial] repression, division of loyalties, suspicion and corruption, and opposition for opposition's sake, has resulted in ingrained habits of thought which can only be slowly overcome. Working clandestinely, albeit amateurishly, has become second nature; concern over the possibilities of penetration by opposition groups is distorted to the point where they think of tying up their best cadres in internal "intelligence" units; decentralization of direction and operation, necessary for survival under the old restrictions, have left their inheritances of weaknesses in executive and administrative ability.²⁵

A Wasted Year

The habits of mind that shaped the Ngo brothers's approach to intelligence and security matters affected every aspect of their governing. Station apprehensions about their style were shared by Ambassador Durbrow and by all elements of the US Mission except the MAAG, now under Army Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams. The degree of Station influence on the Ambassador's views is not certain but was probably substantial, as CIA's contacts—unilateral agents as well as the nearly exclusive relationship with Nhu—provided unique access to the workings of the government. The Ambassador saw COS Natsios as often as two or three times a day; things got so cozy that Natsios began to worry about the way it looked to the rest of the Embassy and mentioned to Durbrow his concern about being seen as a sinister influence on the Ambassador.²⁶

Granting that a recent increase in Viet Cong terrorism had created an unavoidable distraction, Durbrow concluded in December 1957 that Diem had largely wasted the opportunity of the past year to begin urgent economic development programs. The Ambassador called for pressure on Diem for decisions on economic and social issues and warned that continued inaction "might lead to a deteriorating situation in Viet Nam within a few years."²⁷

²⁵ FVSA 1545, 5 September 1955.

²⁶ Natsios interview, 6 March 1991.

²⁷ Embassy Saigon Dispatch 191, 5 December 1957, FRUS, 1955-57, I, Vietnam, 869-884. The increase in terrorism represented what the Viet Cong called the "extermination of traitors" campaign, designed to help the VC survive the government's anti-Communist repression program in the countryside. (See Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An*, pp. 82-84.)

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Lieutenant General Samuel Williams.
On his left is Nick Natsios.

General Williams was the only Country Team member to dissent. He argued that the threat from the North fully justified Diem's preoccupation with security matters and denied that this weakened the regime politically. Natsios saw Williams as uncritically supportive of Diem, and as having adopted a dangerously proprietary attitude toward the Vietnamese Army. In any case, as 1957 drew to a close, not even the pessimistic majority on the Country Team saw the situation as irretrievable.²⁸

The mutual reserve that now characterized the relationship between the Palace and the Station did not prevent Nhu from indulging in one of his moments of candor. Talking to DCOS Douglas Blaufarb in January 1958, he said that Tran Chanh Thanh would stay as Information Minister despite the decay of his Anti-Communist Denunciation League into a refuge for "opium smokers and prostitutes." Although Nhu wanted to revitalize this propaganda arm of the anti-Communist campaign, he does not seem to have solicited Station help. Indeed, except for sporadic Station support of NRM training, the era of joint domestic political action had been over since the end of 1956.²⁹

²⁸ Embassy Saigon Dispatch 191; Natsios interview, 6 March 1991; Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991.

²⁹ Memorandum of Meeting, Douglas Blaufarb and Ngo Dinh Nhu on 13 January 1958, dated 14 January 1958, attachment to FVSA 8445, 22 August 1958,

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As the sense of partnership dissipated, Nhu focused increasingly on third-country matters in his dealings with the Station. After declaring his Diem contact to the Ambassador in the spring of 1957, Natsios began to represent the Station at some of these meetings, listening to Nhu expound on the politics of India, Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, SEATO, and on French plotting against Diem from Phnom Penh and from the French military base at Seno in Laos. At a meeting with Blaufarb in January, having just returned from being wined and dined by U Nu in Rangoon, Nhu "seemed more than usually relaxed and pleased with himself." [redacted]

Until well into 1958, Nhu's personal style had been modest, and the policy issues he discussed with the Station represented the practical concerns of a fragile government. In late March, during a visit to Saigon by DDP Frank Wisner, this began to change. In the course of two long meetings, Nhu waxed grandiloquent about South Vietnam's new stature in the region. According to Nhu, the Indians claimed they had told Ho Chi Minh that "the Ngo family is South Vietnam." Ho was said to have responded that he was "anxious to meet Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife, and will go anywhere at any time in order to do so." Nhu also told Wisner that the Burmese were following his advice in their reaction to a Hanoi proposal on Vietnamese reunification. And he thought he had a channel into the Masjumi Party that could be used to influence the Indonesian situation.³¹ [redacted]

Neither Wisner nor Nhu appears to have mentioned the Vietnamese insurgency. But a flow of reporting had begun, at this time, on the deterioration of government control in the countryside, especially in the provinces of the southwest. Despite Nhu's reticence on the subject, he and Diem had apparently already decided how to deal with it. In February, just six weeks after Blaufarb reported Nhu's assurances of NRM commitment to community development, NRM chief Nguyen Thieu told [redacted] that Diem's goal for the organization was "the elimination of subversive communist elements in every village, however remote—a task beyond the Army and other security forces, even with massive US aid." Thieu added, without specifying the means

³⁰ [redacted] passim; FVSA 8445, 22 August 1958, [redacted]

³¹ FVSA 7785, 30 April 1958, ibid., [redacted]

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to be employed, that a second NRM task was to ensure a large government majority in the parliamentary elections scheduled for 1959.³² []

Thieu assured the Station that only one more year of subsidies would be needed to put the NRM on its feet and "wipe out all possibility of a relapse of Free Vietnam away from democratic forms." The question whether the Diem government was even then respecting democratic forms was presumably in the mind of [] case officer, [] when he acknowledged Headquarters' earlier concerns about the NRM. Although reserving judgment about its prospects, he noted the absence of alternative instruments: the NRM "looms as the only significant fully overt political grouping remaining in Free Vietnam, for better or worse."³³ []

At Cross Purposes []

Even had the Ngo family been working together, the VC could have constituted a mortal threat. Unfortunately for the anti-Communist cause, the spring of 1958 saw intensified conflict between Ngo Dinh Nhu and Ngo Dinh Can. In a series of meetings in late March and early April, Can convoked the National Assembly deputies from Central Vietnam to air his grievances about Nhu, and to urge them to give first priority to the interests of the Center. On one fundamental issue, however, the two brothers seem to have been of one mind. Whenever the conciliatory approach necessary to attract popular loyalty conflicted with their campaign to destroy the Communists, repression would take precedence.³⁴ []

Meeting Blaufarb in early June, Nhu made this choice of priorities explicit. He said he had recently addressed all the district chiefs in the country, telling them that they were on the wrong track if they assumed they needed popular support in order to fight the VC. Nhu said he had pointed out their responsibilities to "tax and discipline the population which in turn would not respond to them with affection." He went on to prescribe what he said he had already urged on local officials in the south and west, that is, a covert organization equal to that of the Communists. According to Nhu, his audience reacted with surprise and interest, apparently never having "given such matters much thought." To Blaufarb, Nhu seemed to have adopted this hard line approach as the core of his strategy against the insurgents.³⁵ []

³² FVSA 7166, 11 February 1958, [] Nguyen Thieu is not to be confused with General Nguyen Van Thieu, later President of South Vietnam. []

³³ FVSA 7166; FVSW 3883, []

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³⁵ [] No Blaufarb response is mentioned. []

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A month later, Ngo Dinh Can expressed essentially the same view to a Station source, saying that the government's main task was to maintain the country's respect for it. VC could not be reformed and must be killed: "VC methods are necessary to combat the VC." Can endorsed the existence of opposition parties, but only if they were controlled by the Can Lao to prevent their falling under the control of VC agents.³⁶ [redacted]

Evidence now emerged that Nhu perceived an increasingly adversarial quality in his relationship with official Americans, including his CIA contacts. In April, Tran Quoc Buu told Blaufarb that Nhu was aware the Americans detested him and his wife but that he insisted his commitment to the government's "political line" would continue whether the Americans sympathized or not. That this distrust extended to the CIA became clear when Blaufarb discovered that the driver he had hired on the recommendation of Tran Kim Tuyen, chief of the Can Lao's intelligence service, was not deaf, as Tuyen had claimed. He also was fluent in both French and English. Blaufarb and Natsios noted in the spring of 1958 Nhu had become less accessible and less receptive to advice. [redacted]

[redacted] but they also saw it as the product of Nhu's habituation to power and, perhaps, "a latent anti-West bias."³⁷ [redacted]

In July, the Station obtained unequivocal evidence of the regime's willingness surreptitiously to defy the US mission, including its CIA contacts. The episode began when Nhu urged Blaufarb to recommend using the Vietnamese as a channel to the Khmer Serei, the principal organized opposition to Cambodia's neutralist Prince Sihanouk. Blaufarb reacted coolly, but Nhu persisted. Eventually, the Station and Ambassador Durbrow combined to get Nhu and Diem to agree to suspend Vietnamese efforts to overthrow Sihanouk. Nhu told Blaufarb he recognized that American collusion against Sihanouk was unlikely and that working at cross purposes was undesirable. But the apparent concession was empty, as [redacted] [redacted] the Palace continued its plotting against Sihanouk.³⁸ [redacted]

³⁶ [redacted]
³⁷ [redacted] enclosure 1 to FVSA 7899, 6 June 1958, [redacted] Natsios interview, 6 March 1991; Blaufarb interview, 11 April 1991; blind memorandum, "Ngo Dinh Nhu: Current Status as of May 1958," n.d., [redacted]
³⁸ SAIG 6997, 21 July 1958, and SAIG 7000, 22 July 1958, [redacted] [redacted] Natsios interview, 6 March 1991. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

As for management, "xenophobia [had] no greater exponent in the GVN than SEPES Director Tran Kim Tuyen." The Station had earlier described Tuyen's deputy Hoang Ngoc Diep, as overbearing, deceitful, and ineffective, but in view of the shortage of qualified personnel saw nothing to be gained by trying to get him replaced. Instead, the Station would give up trying to develop SEPES as an institution [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]⁴⁰ [REDACTED]

These frustrations and disagreements were accompanied by another burst of Station energy on behalf of the NRM. In August, the Station judged that the three-month pilot program in the Delta was succeeding, and it devoted eight single-spaced pages to justifying its continuation. But except for a reference to "community works" and "peasant cooperatives," the dispatch said nothing about specific objectives or the means of achieving them or the results already observed. This may have caused some hesitation at Headquarters, as the Station complained in September that the desk was still pondering the NRM's February request for renewed financial support. In October, the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] recommended replacing ad hoc support of individual projects with a return to the monthly subsidy that the Station had begun in 1955. Headquarters must have acceded, because [REDACTED] reported in November having committed the Station to a monthly payment until June 1959. In the progress report for December, he judged that the NRM had "developed in fine fashion."⁴¹ [REDACTED]

Whatever had encouraged the Station about the NRM—again, it supplied no details—pessimism grew during this period both about the Agency's relationship with Nhu and about the larger question of the regime's prospects of success. Blaufarb noted in November that Nhu had become progressively less informative on internal affairs, and that he and Natsios were finding candid discussion replaced by "a flow of talk which is almost impossible to interrupt." Nhu's reticence on internal politics and the differences of opinion

[REDACTED]

⁴⁰ Ibid.; FVSA 4356, 11 December 1956, [REDACTED] If the Station is referring here to the same Diep whose collegial attitude impressed Larry St. George, it clearly reversed its opinion after St. George's departure. [REDACTED]

⁴¹ [REDACTED]

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that caused it essentially precluded any new joint activity in the domestic political arena.⁴²

The Station judged that Nhu's standing with Diem was increasing even as the government's popularity was declining. It saw intellectual arrogance as the essence of his personal style and covert manipulation as the heart of his method. In the Station's view, these traits prevented Nhu from recognizing the regime's greatest failure, the substitution of paternalism for positive leadership and real communication with the masses. The Station remained uncertain how much of Nhu's activity was unknown to Diem, but was confident that the brothers shared the same assumptions about the proper relationship between government and people.⁴³

The result, as the Station saw it, was a neutral attitude among the masses, but increasing discontent in the Army, business, professions, and the National Assembly, as well as growing numbers of disaffected Catholics, regional blocs, and ethnic minorities. An assessment sent to Headquarters in October 1958 implied that subversion was a relatively unimportant factor in the government's decline, saying that Communists, the sects, and dissident non-Communist politicians constituted an opposition element of no great size. The Station acknowledged that growing popular alienation augured poorly for Ngo Dinh Diem. But like its predecessors over the previous four years it saw him continuing in office if only for lack of a competitor. Even a military coup seemed ruled out, for the time being, by the absence of a leader commanding the respect of the entire Army.⁴⁴

⁴² FVSA 8780,

⁴³ Ibid.

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William Colby arrived in Saigon as Deputy COS in February 1959, and COS Natsios shortly began sharing with him his regular meetings with Ngo Dinh Nhu. Together they watched Nhu and Diem grope for a political formula potent enough to resist subversion and strengthen the government's hold on a disaffected but still quiescent population. The 1956 recruitment of and Natsios' subsequent emphasis on acquiring controlled agents had substantially improved the Station's access to the regime's inner workings. This reporting grew in importance as policy differences between the Vietnamese and the US made Nhu increasingly wary even of the Agency contacts who had succeeded his friends Paul Harwood and Virginia Spence.¹

Station reports of early 1959 describe Diem as preoccupied, even obsessed, with security issues. At the beginning of January, he cautioned an audience of government officials about the risk of subversion even by "those friends who aid us" and enjoined them not to reveal state secrets or confidential plans. A week later, addressing the government bloc of the National Assembly, he praised Ne Win of Burma for having compelled holders of safe deposit boxes to open them for government inspection. Not only illegal riches, but "many plans and plots were discovered by this move." Diem proposed to have the Treasury "provide safe deposit boxes to the public, which would then be opened to expose similar activities in Vietnam." More ominous, in the view of Diem's audience, was his stated concern about the vulnerability to VC blandishments of former Viet Minh now serving the government. Although struck by Diem's "humble and rather quiet delivery," the deputies thought his remarks about subversion would make it even harder to draw the line between dissidence and constructive criticism.²

¹ Natsios interview, 6 March 1991.

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The Ngo brothers worried not only about Communist subversion but about continuing French hostility. In February, Nhu told the Station that "renegade" Frenchmen, including two high officials at the Quai d'Orsay, had resumed plotting against Diem. Four French citizens had been arrested, along with a "1000-man agent net involved in this activity many of whom talked to save their skins and have implicated many others." There was, apparently, some substance to Nhu's charges. Over a year later, the Station reported that four Frenchmen and some 20 of their Vietnamese agents had been arrested in December 1959; the Frenchmen were not released until June 1960 after negotiations between Diem and visiting French Finance Minister Antoine Pinay.³ []

Political Prelude to "Armed Struggle" []

Tran Quoc Buu insisted at this time that all major policy decisions were being made by Ngo Dinh Nhu. If he posed an issue to Diem, Buu said, the President would temporize, saying he needed some time for reflection. The same question posed to Nhu would draw an immediate response, and "a few days later the identical solution may be obtained from Diem." This report drew an anxious request from Headquarters for an interpretation of the government's functioning, and an estimate of Nhu's prospects as a replacement for Diem.⁴ []

The response has not been found, but the Station had in April begun reporting in considerable detail the monologues by Nhu that Natsios had earlier described as nearly impossible to interrupt. Filled with the empty theorizing and condescending moral judgments of a Left Bank intellectual, they suggested some of the isolation from reality which had been remarked in Diem several years earlier. An eleven-page account of Nhu's thoughts on economics, provided by [] began with the pronouncement that "all economic policy is basically nothing but a projection on a material plane of a philosophical doctrine, of a certain conception of life and the universe." Other such dicta, issued directly to the Station, dealt with Vietnam's neighbors: "Indonesia is in a serious situation, indeed," and Thailand is "another country without a moral basis."⁵ []

But the central issue of the government's relationship with its people kept intruding. Nhu's perpetually conflicted views on this problem goaded him into repeated contradictions. In mid-1958, as already noted, he had told Douglas Blaufarb of his advice to South Vietnamese district chiefs to abandon any

³ []
 FVSA 11331, 20 July 1960, []
⁴ [] FVSW- 5173,
 21 May 1959, []
⁵ FVSA 9497, 21 April 1959, []

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effort to ingratiate themselves with the peasantry. He professed to hold the same view in early 1959 when he rejected Tran Quoc Buu's argument that the government needed the support of the masses. This time, Nhu justified his position with apocalyptic talk about a third world war determining the final political alignment of small countries like Vietnam; meanwhile, he said, there was nothing to be done.⁶ [redacted]

The pendulum swung again, and in April 1959 Nhu told Natsios and Colby of the need to "develop a series of political, economic and social organizations in Vietnam in order to attract the loyalty of its citizens to the GVN." He thought the average Vietnamese too diffident to aspire to any direct relationship with the state, and in need of "intermediaries to which he can attach his loyalties and which can represent his interests." Diem expressed the same sentiments two months later in a talk with Ambassador Durbrow about the security situation when he emphasized the need to attract the loyalty of the population.⁷ [redacted]

Although certainly welcomed by the Station and the Embassy, these statements did not lead either side to propose new programs, nor did they reduce the adversarial climate that defined especially the CIA and Embassy relationships with Nhu. In March, the Embassy produced a comprehensive dispatch on the Can Lao that Natsios had suggested the previous August, and for which he provided intelligence and editorial support. The report described illegal Can Lao business practices, which included under-invoicing in the cinnamon bark trade and the sale of export licenses.⁸ [redacted]

Such practices had drawn Congressional attention to the conduct of the American aid program, and Ambassador Durbrow hoped to persuade the Ngo family to bring them to a halt. He sent economic aid director John Gardiner to discuss the matter with Diem. In July he raised it himself with Nhu, who replied with a disquisition on economic development in a backward country. Durbrow backed off, and the Embassy reported that it found Nhu's explanation plausible. It reasoned that Can Lao "opportunism" might be all for the best if "practiced mainly for the benefit of the country" and concluded that Americans should avoid being "distracted" by their own moral judgments. The Station also began to doubt the wisdom of pressing the issue, apparently because it feared for the safety of [redacted] who had furnished the information on the Party's commercial activity.⁹ [redacted]

⁶ [redacted]
⁷ FVS 3283, 13 May 1959; SAIG 9166, 28 June 1959; [redacted]

⁸ Saigon Embassy Dispatch 279, 2 March 1959, *FRUS, 1958-60, I, Vietnam*, 156-158; FVSA 9499, 14 April 1959, [redacted]

⁹ Saigon Embassy Dispatch 40, 30 July 1959, *FRUS, 1958-60, I, Vietnam*, 220-225; FVSA 10119, 4 August 1959, [redacted]

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While the US and the Ngo brothers held each other at arm's length, the Saigon regime and the Communists both moved toward greater reliance on force in their struggle for control in the countryside. In January, after Central Committee member Le Duan reported on the parlous condition of the Communist Party in the South, the Hanoi leadership modified its 1956 decision to rely on political means of opposition to Diem. It now permitted military action, although political struggle was to remain the principal instrument of resistance to Diem. In May, Hanoi formed the 559th Transportation Group to handle infiltration of personnel and materiel into South Vietnam. On the other side, also in May, Diem published Ordinance 10-59, which prescribed the death penalty, without the right of appeal, for vaguely defined crimes against the state. Beginning in the summer of 1959, the number of guerrilla attacks rose sharply, and so did Saigon's anti-Communist repression.¹⁰ [redacted]

During the months preceding the rise in guerrilla activity, Station sources followed the struggle between Ngo Dinh Nhu and Ngo Dinh Can for influence on Diem and for control of the governmental apparatus in Cochin China. In February 1959, Can was said to be moving in on the Can Lao organization in several Mekong Delta provinces; he had told Diem he would participate in the Party's reorganization, but only if he were given full control. Nhu had earlier told Blaufarb about Can's ambition to run the Can Lao and had described his brother as a "nervous cardiac, given to impulsive decisions and too narrow and subjective in outlook." In July, one of Can's operatives [redacted] reported on harassment and even arrests of Can's organizers in the South by SEPES chief Tran Kim Tuyen.¹¹ [redacted]

In this predatory political climate the Station had to decide if and how to use the National Assembly elections of August 1959 to promote the evolution of a moderate, representative government. [redacted] was concerned mainly to "moderate the GVN's almost fanatical aim to elect its slate 100 percent" and thus to reduce its vulnerability to charges of rigging the election. [redacted]

[redacted]¹² [redacted]

¹⁰ Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An*, pp. 19n, 99-106; William E. Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 57-58. [redacted]

¹¹ [redacted] passim; FVSA 7899, 6 June 1958 and FVSA 10054, 28 July 1959, *ibid.*, [redacted]

¹² FVSA 10065, 28 July 1959 and FVSA 10217, 8 September 1959, [redacted]

[redacted] FVSA 10118, 4 August 1959, *ibid.*, [redacted]

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Clandestine reporting supported the Station's view that "while the population is apathetic toward the elections, the GVN [Government of Vietnam] is not." Agents told of forced withdrawals of unacceptable candidates, pressure on province and district officials to rig the results, and trucking soldiers in to vote in crucial districts in Saigon. [redacted]

[redacted] During all of this, the Agency's attachment to an outworn propaganda theme was demonstrated by the Station's effort, through the NRM, to provide for a North Vietnamese representation in the new, putatively all-Vietnam, Assembly.¹³ [redacted]

William Colby took over the NRM project from [redacted] just before the 1959 elections. The emptiness of the NRM program struck Colby as it had his predecessors; like them, he proposed to give it substance through a cadre training program. In the third reversal of Station practice on NRM funding, Colby abandoned the institutional subsidy and restricted Station support to cadre training. He hoped thereby to "build reality into this facade" with a "corps of informed and energetic workers." Again like his predecessors, Colby seems to have left it to the Vietnamese to devise the program's substantive and motivational content. After watching their efforts for four months, he reported without elaboration that he saw "progress on this peculiarly CIA job of political development."¹⁴ [redacted]

Mobile Warfare [redacted]

On 26 January 1960, the Second Indochina War began when some 200 Viet Cong troops overran a Vietnamese Army (ARVN) regimental headquarters at Trang Sup, in Tay Ninh Province. There were other attacks during the Tet holidays of 1960, and together they represented the beginning of the Communist recovery from the Party's near-extinction by government repression. [redacted]

Aware of the attrition suffered by the VC organization, observers on the government side had developed a "last gasp" theory to explain the rise in guerrilla activity in the last half of 1959. Like the southern Communists themselves, Diem and MAAG Chief Williams, and apparently the rest of the Country Team, saw the Viet Cong on the ropes, reacting in desperation to increasingly successful government programs. The Station seems not to have dissented from this view, at the time, but had already begun trying to anticipate new Communist attacks.¹⁵ [redacted]

¹³ FVSA 10118; FVS 3706, 22 August 1959, [redacted]; FVSA 10065, [redacted]

¹⁴ FVSA 10693, 20 January 1960, *ibid.* The dispatch does not describe the progress that Colby observed. [redacted]

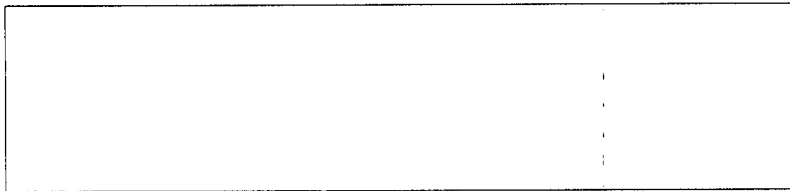
¹⁵ Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), pp. 334-338; Natsios interview, 6 March 1991. [redacted]

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Part of Natsios's attention to this subject was provoked by General Williams's propensity to deny having seen Station reporting on it. Natsios had begun hand-delivering it to the general, requiring him to initial it after reading. The wisdom of this practice was demonstrated when Williams complained, at a Country Team meeting after the Trang Sup attack, that CIA had provided no advance warning. Anticipating the complaint, Natsios had with him the folder containing reports predicting a major attack in Tay Ninh during the period of the Trang Sup disaster. He read from this coverage and displayed the cover sheet with Williams's initials on it to the Country Team.¹⁶

Influenced in part by the continuing high level of Communist military activity, Natsios and the Embassy (though not Williams) came to believe that the regime's authority was fading, and that obstruction by Nhu nullified American efforts to get Diem to correct a potentially disastrous trend. This led to some agonizing in correspondence with Headquarters over ways and means to get Nhu out of the way, perhaps as Ambassador to Washington. Natsios pointed out the improbability of Diem's acceding to Nhu's departure, but Headquarters persisted.¹⁷



By April, Natsios had come to regard Nhu's removal as an "excellent but impractical" idea.¹⁸

Nhu stayed, and no one can say whether his departure would have prevented the intensified non-Communist opposition to the Diem government that followed the VC inauguration of guerrilla warfare. In April, eighteen of the old-line nationalist politicians assembled at the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon and issued a manifesto calling for political reforms including recognition of the parties they represented. Diem and Nhu rebuffed them, and the incident came to look to William Colby like "another milestone in the gradual centrifugal separation of the Vietnamese body politic."¹⁹

At this point, apparently responding to pressure from Headquarters, the Station had already begun working on its contacts in and near the government to talk Diem into reforms which clandestine reporting showed to be increasingly

¹⁶ Natsios interview, 6 March 1991.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.; FVSA 11040, 21 April 1960,

¹⁹ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 73.

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urgent. The Station also approached Nhu directly, and gave Ambassador Durbrow a briefing paper that he used with Diem. The Station approached various other contacts, encouraging them also to use their access to the Palace, and told Headquarters that the government had already acted, perhaps for reasons of its own, on several of its suggestions.²⁰ []

Another Try at Nation-Building []

In June 1960, Colby replaced Natsios as Chief of Station. Natsios had recommended him when FE Division Chief Al Ulmer asked for a nomination; it turned out that Colby was Ulmer's preference as well. Almost immediately he launched an effort, similar to that of the 1954-1956 period, to work with the government to bolster its authority and popular appeal. Headquarters welcomed Colby's proposal to restore a cooperative relationship with the Palace, though it now saw Nhu as a questionable instrument of Station political action. It recommended a series of briefings for Diem designed to deal with the likelihood that his own people had not told him, or that he had simply refused to accept, how bad things were in the countryside. Headquarters suggested Lansdale-style psychological operations, including ombudsman and civic action programs on the Philippine model, and wanted the Station to seek by all available means to revitalize the land reform program, get press censorship relaxed, and stimulate better government use of intelligence.²¹ []

Colby's departure from his predecessor's approach to the Palace was drastic enough to prompt Natsios later to say that Colby had "jumped into bed with Nhu." During his 16 months as DCOS, Colby had unstintingly supported Natsios's handling of the Station's senior government contacts, giving no hint that he favored a different approach.²² []

Evan Parker, Indochina Branch Chief at Headquarters, also noticed the change under the new management, thinking of Colby as "more optimistic" than Natsios, as something of a "do-gooder." But the difference, to Parker, was mainly one of style: Colby simply did not scrutinize the Ngo brothers and their government with Natsios's pessimistic detachment.²³ []

²⁰ FVSA 11040, 21 April 1960. []

²¹ [] *ibid.*; Natsios interview, 6 March 1991. Headquarters' expression of distrust for Nhu and its confidence in the Philippines as a psywar model may have owed something to the fact that its author, David Smith, had been a member of Lansdale's Station. []

²² Colby later wrote that "the surprising aspect of the Station's posture when I arrived was the complete absence of any kind of political or paramilitary action program—something that would use the CIA's techniques and talents to advance American policies and interests." (See Colby, *Last Victory*, p. 84.) Colby here leaves out of account Station support to the NRM and to the paramilitary operations against the North being conducted with Colonel Le Quang Tung. []

²³ Natsios interview, 6 March 1991; Parker interview, 8 March 1991. []

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Colby had, in fact, begun cultivating Nhu while still serving as DCOS. In February 1960, he reported a meeting at which Nhu repeated his belief in the necessity of a political base for the counterinsurgency effort. Nhu "mentioned his many efforts to convince the President of this" and, in his first known request for conceptual guidance from CIA, asked for any relevant literature the Station could provide. Colby's relay of this request to Headquarters specified works by Liddell-Hart on T.E. Lawrence, and by Lenin and Mao.²⁴

If an April exchange between Diem and MAAG chief General Williams is any indicator, the President was unmoved by Nhu's claimed efforts to persuade him of the need for a political mass base. Williams, uncharacteristically concerned about Diem's political support, opined that "the problem was not entirely military and that it would be necessary to win over the entire population" while strengthening civilian administration. Diem refused to be engaged on the subject and, contradicting his statement of the year before to Ambassador Durbrow, replied simply that "he thought the problem could be solved by military means." Meanwhile, the Embassy disagreed with Colby's view that Nhu represented an instrument of reform: Durbrow, echoing the French in 1954 and 1955, cabled the Department in May that all the regime's current derelictions in both foreign and domestic policy were "basically due to [the] machinations of Diem's brother Nhu and his henchmen." By mid-September, Durbrow was telling the Department that if Diem continued to resist essential reforms, it might become necessary to look for an alternative Vietnamese leadership.²⁵

As Durbrow's attitude toward the regime hardened, Colby tried to enlighten the Palace on the potential rewards of a reform program. In an August meeting with Diem, he urged the President to encourage political organizing "independent of the government." He also called for a larger effort to publicize the government's achievements and reminded Diem of the need to begin preparing for the presidential election scheduled for April 1961. Diem took the opportunity to complain about his "corrupt and tradition-bound bureaucracy," but Colby did not seize this opportunity to note the corrosive effect of nepotism on the energy, integrity, and competence of a government at war. Instead, the COS settled for a promise to give Diem a copy of the US "Code of Ethics for Government Service."²⁶

²⁴ FVSA 10819, 17 February 1960.

²⁵ Elbridge Durbrow, Telegrams to Department of State, 3 May and 16 September 1960, *FRUS, 1958-60, Volume I, Vietnam*, pp. 434, 579.

²⁶ FVSA 11236, 25 August 1960.

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Diem also complained about US footdragging on the expansion of the Army. Colby tried to show him "an easier path through the American bureaucracy by strengthening the Civil Guard" rather than adding regular units, and Diem subsequently raised the idea with Durbrow.²⁷

Intelligence Reorganization and More Pressure for Political Reforms

It may have been signs of motion toward the centralization of Vietnamese intelligence collection that encouraged Colby to press his suggestions for these more comprehensive reforms. After six years of inaction on repeated CIA proposals, the Palace asked the Station on 2 August to suggest how to organize a "central intelligence agency" in South Vietnam. Nguyen Dinh Thuan, Diem's Secretary of State at the Presidency, also asked Colby to recommend on a "personal and confidential basis" potential candidates to head the agency. This triggered an urgent exchange with Headquarters, which generally welcomed the opening, although one staff officer warned that such efforts elsewhere in the Third World had failed: these governments would accept CIA help, then use the new organizational superstructure to prevent direct CIA contact with operating elements.²⁸

Colby recommended a coordinating agency, in order to centralize the work of the Vietnamese without adding one more to the existing proliferation of collection organs. But he also thought it should have the authority to run its own collection operations, if necessary, and to "protect sources from other agencies and departments." He thought it should be restricted to intelligence work, but Headquarters, agreeing that SEPES had "conducted covert action malodorously," maintained that the new agency should not be prohibited from exploiting its own intelligence product. On the question of leadership, Headquarters agreed with Colby that no one currently heading an intelligence organ should be named. It suggested another of the Ngo brothers, Ngo Dinh Luyen, despite Luyen's lack of any experience in the field. In any case, competence was not Headquarters' main concern. Acknowledging that such an appointment would look like more nepotism, it argued that the family connection would prevent SEPES chief Tran Kim Tuyen from sabotaging the new setup.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid. In fact, expanding the Civil Guard as a way around the cap on the size of the Army had been discussed for several years in the US Mission. (See especially *FRUS, 1958-60, Volume I, Vietnam*, passim.)

²⁸ SAIG 1061, 2 August 1960; Deputy Chief, FI/Ops, Memorandum for Chief FE/VCL, Attention Mr. Whitehurst, "Comments on Proposed Central Intelligence Agency for Viet Nam," 23 August 1960; both

²⁹ SAIG 10611 3 August 1960; both *ibid.*,

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With Nguyen Dinh Thuan as the action officer, the Palace began a tortuous process of evaluating the Station's proposals. Meanwhile, Colby pursued the covert action theme with Nhu, encouraging the search for a comprehensive political strategy. In early September, Nhu came up with an idea similar to—perhaps borrowed from—the doctrine developed by French General Lyautey in Morocco early in the century. He proposed creating circles of secure villages, emphasizing political programs and armed protection in the villages at the periphery. Nhu acknowledged that the idea might sound abstruse but thought it preferable to what he saw as current reliance on “keeping main routes open and striking out in hit-or-miss fashion from central points.”³⁰

Colby responded a week or so later with a 66-point list of suggestions for improving the government's standing with its people and for more effectively prosecuting the war against the Viet Cong. Presented to Nhu as Colby's “personal thoughts,” the proposals had been approved by Ambassador Durbrow as a ploy in his campaign to nudge the Palace into reform measures. The list that Colby gave Nhu carefully avoided direct criticism of the Saigon government but covered the entire range of social, economic, and security issues facing it.³¹

Colby repeated for Nhu's benefit his August recommendations to Diem. He then went far beyond these by calling for National Assembly investigations of the behavior of civil servants, the military, the police, and the judiciary. Colby acknowledged that the country had entered a “critical period” and suggested that the President administer a “psychological shock” to the public by reshuffling the Cabinet, convening a national conference of politicians across the non-Communist spectrum, declaring martial law in the Mekong Delta, and threatening not to run for reelection in April 1961.³²

With the possible exception of martial law for the Delta, Colby's proposals were so predictably distasteful to a man of Diem's convictions and governing style as to suggest that they were driven less by sober analysis than by a sense of desperation. There was, as Colby must have expected, no response. A month later, Durbrow made a direct approach to Diem, repeating many of the same ideas and urging that Nhu be sent abroad. Neither his initiative nor Colby's produced major changes in the government's way of doing business. Diem, however, publicly acknowledged governmental failings in his so-called State of the Union message of 3 October and brought some new blood into the

³⁰ FVS 5010, 6 September 1960;

³¹ FVSA 11536, 22 September 1960;

³² Ibid.

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Cabinet. But these gestures did not persuade Durbrow, who had already suggested that Diem might have to be replaced, to expect reforms drastic enough to win popular confidence.³³

If William Colby still entertained hope for the regime, Durbrow's skepticism was shared by the Station officers in touch with the non-Communist opposition. George Carver, later the influential Special Assistant to the DCI for Vietnam Affairs, recalled that, as one of Colby's younger case officers, he had already come to see Diem as unsalvageable. Only fundamental reforms would save the regime from the insurgency, he thought, but Diem would never change, and the reforms would never come. Station management, on the other hand, and officers conducting liaison with Diem's intelligence and security organs, tended to see the Ngo family, whatever its deficiencies, as indispensable. But even the most pessimistic saw no immediate threat to Diem's survival, and the debate produced no tension or polarization in the Station.³⁴

In Colby's view, Carver and like-minded officers were simply reflecting the anti-Diem bias they had absorbed from their contacts. But the COS felt obligated to disseminate reporting from the regime's critics. He then tried—unsuccessfully, by his own later account—to restore what he considered a more balanced perspective by means of his own monthly assessment for Headquarters.³⁵

³³ Elbridge Durbrow, Telegrams to Department of State, 15 October and 24 December 1960; Saigon Embassy Dispatch 157, 15 October 1960; Saigon Embassy Airgram, 3 November 1960; FRUS, 1958-60, I, Vietnam, pp. 595-596, 598-604, 622-625, 744; Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 123. In *Lost Victory*, Colby criticizes Durbrow for "irrelevant" and "transparently hostile" proposals that were in fact almost identical to those Colby presented to Ngo Dinh Nhu. Station reporting at the time cited correspondence between the Station and CIA Headquarters, not ambassadorial instructions, as the genesis of Colby's approach to Nhu, and gave no hint of reluctance to urge these reforms. Queried in 1991 about his role in this episode, Colby said he "may well have" conveyed the list to Nhu; if so "probably for the Ambassador." He did not recall ever having tried to talk the Ambassador into a more cooperative approach to the Palace and thought it unlikely he would have done so, because in his stated view the Ambassador, not CIA, was responsible for policy matters. (See Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 74-75; William Colby, interview by the author, Washington, DC, 16 October 1991 (hereafter cited as Colby interview, 16 October 1991); FVSA 11536; SAIG 1400,)

³⁴ George A. Carver, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, Washington, DC, 23 October 1991.

³⁵ Colby interview, 16 October 1991. Colby attributes this failure to the fact that the pessimistic intelligence reports were widely distributed by cable, while his own summaries, "not highly classified," went to the Headquarters desk by pouch. He does not explain why he did not address his views to a wider audience. (See Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 106.)

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UNCLASSIFIED**The November 1960 Mutiny**

The Station was unanimous about one thing, namely, that dissidence among non-Communists in Saigon was on the rise. In July, it reported having accelerated its coverage of the non-Communist opposition. In September, it began assembling its holdings on military officers. By October, it was debriefing General Tran Van Minh, using him and other contacts to try to identify potential coup participants. Meanwhile, as part of a routine effort to broaden its access, George Carver recontacted Hoang Co Thuy, a prominent Dai Viet oppositionist politician and acquaintance of earlier Station officers.³⁶

For all its efforts to chart the rise of disaffection with Ngo family rule, CIA obtained no advance warning of the paratroopers' coup of 11 November. Like everyone but the rebels themselves, Station officers got their first inkling from the pre-dawn movement of armored vehicles, followed by gunfire directed at the Palace. But the Station's coverage of the opposition to Diem had prepared it to take the lead among US Mission elements in identifying the coup leadership and clarifying its intentions.³⁷

Early in the morning Station officers were already canvassing their contacts or taking to the streets for direct observation of rebel activity. George Carver hit pay dirt immediately when, on calling Hoang Co Thuy, he was invited to meet a group of civilian politicians who hoped the military would install them as the new government. With COS Colby's permission, Carver drove to Thuy's home. Reporting to the Station by phone, he also served as the channel for US pressure on the rebels not to storm the Palace, as they threatened to do, but to negotiate with Diem. As Carver recalled it years later, he suffered a genuine crisis of professional conscience over these instructions, for he believed that Diem would have to go, sooner or later, and that manipulating the coup group to Diem's advantage was profoundly mistaken. Carver also recalled his suspicion of Diem's good faith, and how this had intensified his antipathy for his assigned role. But he did what he was told, however reluctantly, and worked to persuade Thuy's group to negotiate with Diem on terms that would preserve the President's role "as the leader in the...anti-Communist battle."³⁸

³⁶ FVST 2059, 13 September 1960; FVST 2239, 19 October 1960;
 Carver interview, 23 October 1991.

³⁷ Colby interview, 16 October 1991; passim.

³⁸ Carver interview, 23 October 1991; FVST 2359, 30 November 1960,

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Meanwhile, Russ Miller, a Station officer assigned to operations against North Vietnam, drove to the Palace with Dick Bender, the Station's Vietnamese linguist. The firing had given way to a standoff, and the two mingled with the foreign journalists there, who were equally in the dark about the rebels' sponsorship and purposes. Miller found no one who could enlighten him; the only spokesman for the coup was perennial oppositionist Dr. Phan Quang Dan, a former CIA contact, who was clearly just trying to board the bandwagon. Dan announced that he would give a press conference at the headquarters of the Joint General Staff (JGS), near the airport, so Miller and Bender got into their jeep. Once underway, they were startled by a burst of fire so close that Bender dove for cover under the dashboard. A rather stout man, he got stuck. Finally freed, with Miller's help, he volunteered to return to the Embassy to observe developments from there.³⁹ []

Miller and another colleague, [] then set out for JGS Headquarters. Dan and the journalists left after the press conference, and Miller and [] simply wandered around—no one had taken any security precautions—until they found the coup leadership. Miller did not recognize anyone and introduced himself and [] as Embassy officers. Some time later, airborne commander Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi showed up. He knew Miller, gave him the use of a phone, and assigned one of his officers to keep the Americans continuously informed. The two Agency officers stayed the night, sleeping on tables when not listening to the grievances of the airborne officers. [] was left with the impression that they were simply fed up with too many deployments in unsuccessful operations against an enemy their government seemed not to know how to fight.⁴⁰ []

Miller's first instructions from the Chief of Station were to avoid any "counseling role" and to limit himself to getting the facts. Carver was already covering Thuy's group of civilians. Discovering that the Station had on-the-spot coverage of both sides of the coup, Ambassador Durbrow appropriated Bill Colby's desk and began listening on an extension to Carver's and Miller's reports. Durbrow was also on the phone with the Palace. Reflecting the State Department's ambivalence about the desirability of prolonging Diem's tenure, he did not offer unequivocal US support, but urged the President to negotiate the paratroopers' demands.⁴¹ []

³⁹ Miller interview, 5 and 12 November 1991. []

⁴⁰ Miller interview, 5 November 1991; [] interview, 20 January 1964. []

⁴¹ Carver interview; *FRUS, 1958-60, I, Vietnam*, pp. 633-637. []

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Like Carver, Miller was now also instructed to pressure the rebels to negotiate rather than storm the Palace.⁴² The military element of the coup leadership seems to have been divided about the relative merits of negotiating with Diem and overthrowing him and was thus susceptible to American pressure. Attacking the Palace remained a rebel option until Army units loyal to Diem arrived on 12 November, and Durbrow's use of the Station to restrain the rebels may therefore have been crucial to Diem's survival in office.⁴³

Negotiations continued through 11 November and into the early hours of the 12th. There seemed to be progress, with substantial concessions from Diem, until the arrival of loyalist units vindicated Carver's misgivings. Diem had used the talks with the rebels simply to gain time while Colonel Tran Thien Khiem, a Catholic and close associate of Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, one of Diem's brothers, organized the rescue operation.⁴⁴

Russ Miller later recalled that it was he, informed by the Station, who told Thi that reinforcements were coming to Diem's aid. Thi recognized that this meant the end of the coup. But he still had a battalion of 105mm howitzers and told Miller he would use his artillery to punish the duplicitous Diem. Miller pointed out the certainty of civilian casualties (many Americans, as well as Vietnamese, lived in the vicinity of the Palace) and the futility of trying to reach Diem in his Palace bunker. Thi relented and shortly left with the rest of the rebel military leadership for the airport and on to refuge in Cambodia.⁴⁵

The defeated military rebels did not take Hoang Co Thuy with them. Instead, he showed up at George Carver's house, looking for asylum. After some scurrying around in search of a safe place, the Station moved Thuy to apartment, where he spent the night of the 12th before being hidden in a safe house ⁴⁶ Eventually,

⁴² Unlike Carver, Miller suffered no anxiety about the wisdom of this mandate, being content to serve as an information channel and leave policy considerations to others. But he did not regard himself as a mere mechanic, concerned only with the conduct of operations and not with their effects. His detachment on this issue arose from the conviction that neither he nor any other American had the answer to Vietnam's problems, nor could we impose it on the Vietnamese even if we found it. He recalled that Colby had often commented on his "noncommittal" attitude toward the Diem regime. (See Miller interview, 5 November 1991.)

⁴³ Miller interview, 5 November 1991; Colby interview, 16 October 1991; Carver interview, 23 October 1991.

⁴⁴ Carver interview, 23 October 1991.

⁴⁵ Miller interview, 5 November 1991; William Rust, draft chapter entitled "Prelude to War: John Kennedy and Vietnam," pp. 10-11. Written for US News and World Report Books in 1982, this draws on interviews with Vietnamese and American witnesses, including Colby, Miller, and Carver, and looks like an unedited rendition of its contributors' recollections. Available in CIA History Staff files.

⁴⁶ Carver recalled Thuy appearing at his doorstep some 48 hours after the coup ended, i.e., circa 14 November.

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[redacted] (Headquarters had also quite gratuitously ordered that he be disguised), [redacted] and flown to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, then to safehaven in Okinawa.⁴⁷ [redacted]

Although more a mutiny than a serious coup d'état, the paratroopers' revolt seriously threatened Ngo Dinh Diem's rule. In the early aftermath, he and Nhu were grateful for the American role in keeping the paratroopers from staging an all-out assault on the Palace. But unconcealed CIA dealings with the rebels and Durbrow's failure to offer unqualified support for the regime fed a sense of betrayal. There were no reprisals against Miller or [redacted] but the chief of Diem's personal security service, Tran Kim Tuyen, told Colby that Carver would have to leave the country. He claimed to have tricked Carver, by means of a staged phone call, into admitting the contact with Thuy. Colby denied that Carver was a CIA officer, or that there were any grounds for his removal.⁴⁸ [redacted]

Ngo Dinh Nhu also protested Carver's role, telling Colby that espionage was to be expected but that Carver's encouragement of the rebels was unacceptable. Colby, sure that there had been no such encouragement, insisted [redacted] on Carver's neutrality [redacted] But when threatening letters began arriving in Carver's mail box, the Station accepted that he could no longer work in Saigon and evacuated him and his family to [redacted]

The security of another important operation, the contact with General Tran Van Minh, was threatened during the coup when, as the Station later put it, "orthodox operational practices suffered in many ways." Anxious to debrief Minh, who as the new Permanent Secretary of Defense should have been well informed, the Station sent [redacted] to Minh's home on 11 November. Upon being admitted to the house, [redacted] found the general surrounded by subordinates. Although this exposure led to no overt consequences, and the relationship continued, the risks in the approach were not offset by any intelligence gain: Minh was firmly astride the fence, acknowledged no contact with either the rebels or Diem, and contributed nothing to the Station's coverage of the mutiny.⁵⁰ [redacted]

The behavior of all the participants in the episode exemplified the dilemma that had first confronted the US Mission in 1955. Ambassador Durbrow, like General Collins, despaired of succeeding with Diem. But he had no one to

⁴⁷ Carver interview, 23 October 1991; [redacted] interview, 20 January 1964; [redacted]

⁴⁸ [redacted] typed (according to penciled notation) 18 July 1961; [redacted] interview, 20 January 1964; Carver interview, 23 October 1991; FVST 2359, [redacted]

⁴⁹ Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 78-80. [redacted]

⁵⁰ FVSA 11867, 19 January 1961, [redacted]

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suggest as a replacement, and could only try to use the mutinous ARVN officers to force on Diem some of the long-resisted reforms. William Colby, like his predecessors in 1955, agreed on the absence of an alternative, but continued to hope, against all experience, that Diem would come to see the wisdom of American advice. The rebel officers themselves, like their earlier Francophile counterparts, had only their grievances in common, and lacking any kind of political program or even serious interest in power, were easily outmaneuvered. The civilian politicians, dependent as they were on military support, counted for even less. The affair did little more than intensify mutual distrust.

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~~SECRET//X1~~**CHAPTER 11***"People's War"*

The display of ARVN's dissatisfaction with Ngo Dinh Diem did nothing to resolve the disagreement between Ambassador Durbrow and Colby about the prospects of the regime's reforming itself. Nevertheless, both the Embassy and the Station pursued their efforts to help the government contain a sharply intensified VC challenge. Unfortunately for the effectiveness of US support, its military component was governed by a flawed strategic concept, while the civilian component had no organizing principle at all that transcended the doctrine and practices of the participating agencies.

Since his arrival in October 1955, MAAG chief General Williams had vigorously supported Diem's view that the Army's mission was to deter or repel invasion across the 17th parallel. He bitterly opposed any effort to involve ARVN in counterinsurgency programs, and when he left, six months after the onset of guerrilla warfare at Tet 1960, ARVN was still organized and trained along entirely conventional lines.¹

The civilian side lacked the guidance of even a flawed concept. Lansdale's earlier vision of a unified effort aimed at countering a Maoist "people's war" had never taken root in the US Mission, each of whose members pursued its own program while clinging to its institutional autonomy. In this climate, the Ambassador functioned more as coordinator than as commander. But the emergency created by Diem's fading authority and by the VC resort to force required a response. The result was the Mission-wide counterinsurgency plan of December 1960. In Colby's retrospective opinion, the result was disappointing in its failure to confront the political struggle in the countryside or to unify the efforts of the various US agencies. Colby had not yet launched the village defense programs that became the hallmark of his tenure, and his only contribution to the plan called for creating a centralized Vietnamese intelligence organization.²

¹ Spector, *Advice and Support*, pp. 320, 326, 339-340.

² Colby, *Last Victory*, p. 83. The text of the plan is in *FRUS, 1961-63, I, Vietnam*, pp. 1-12.

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At precisely the same time that the US Mission in Saigon was groping its way toward the articulation of a counterinsurgency strategy, the Vietnamese Communists were laying the policy and organizational foundations of an intensified campaign to "liberate the South." Policy came in the form of a resolution at the Third Congress of the Lao Dong Party, held in Hanoi in September 1960, that called for overthrowing the Diem government and establishing a "national democratic coalition government in South Viet Nam." The organizational framework appeared on 20 December 1960 when southern Communists announced the formation of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLFSVN).³

An Electoral Distraction

The search for a counterinsurgency strategy competed for attention in early 1961 with the tactical issue of the April presidential election. The Station wanted to help Diem use it to build popular support. Taking it for granted that Diem would win, if necessary by rigging the elections, COS Colby found his options severely limited. There being no prospect of an authentic contest, he decided to promote the appearance of real alternatives by focusing on the selection of a running mate. Accordingly, he urged Nhu to get Diem to run on two tickets, each with a different, but truly competitive, vice-presidential candidate. Having explored this, Nhu responded that it would contravene the electoral law, and the Station then turned to its Vietnamese political contacts in an effort to generate public discussion of potential candidates. Colby thought this might persuade Diem to select a strong running mate "in place of several non-entities he was reported to favor," meanwhile establishing a degree of openness in the selection process.⁴

This initiative enjoyed some success. A public debate began, in the press and elsewhere. The Station later thought its efforts might have helped spoil the prospects of an alleged opium smoker who had seemed to be Diem's first choice. But the Station withheld any material support to Diem's candidacy, reasoning that he would win anyway, and that nothing the CIA could do would make him more popular. As of early April, the Station was urging opposition candidates to emphasize their own programs, rather than concentrate on the regime's failures, but found its advice largely ignored. Diem won, as expected, but the Station did not see the election as having served to build public confidence in the government.⁵

³ Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 114-115.

⁴ FVSA 12044, 16 March 1961, FVST 2503,

⁹ February 1961,

⁵ FVST-2503; FVST 2621, 6 April 1961, *ibid.*

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The palpable decay of the government's position in the countryside would probably have nullified any effort, no matter how energetic, to improve Diem's image during the campaign. An organizer in the joint stay-behind program reported in February, for example, that in Tay Ninh, just northwest of Saigon, the government no longer controlled anything but the capital and areas physically occupied by its troops. Even Tran Quoc Buu, Ngo Dinh Nhu's longtime ally in organized labor, anticipated either defeat by the Viet Cong or another Army mutiny.⁶ []

Meanwhile, more fallout from the failed military coup in November burdened the Station's relationship with Nhu. Colby's deputy [] went to Nhu in May to acknowledge what he assumed the Palace already knew, that CIA in Phnom Penh had been in touch with the exiled mutineers in refuge there. [] assured Nhu that the initiative had come from the Vietnamese, and that CIA had consented to talk to them only to try to prevent their being exploited by the NLF in Phnom Penh. [] offered to serve as a channel to the rebels, if Nhu desired, and later, perhaps optimistically, reported that Nhu appeared to accept the Station's story at face value.⁷ []

A Reprise of 1957 []

In certain respects the US response to developments in South Vietnam in early 1961 mirrored that of 1957, when Diem's triumphal reception in Washington was followed by the Ambassador's gloomy judgment that the Saigon government had wasted a year of opportunities. In May 1961, exactly four years after Diem's trip to the US, Vice President Lyndon Johnson visited Saigon, where he hailed the President as "the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia." Washington now acknowledged the urgency of Diem's problems, but as in 1957 chose unconditional support for Diem as the linchpin of the US program in Vietnam.⁸ Like their counterparts of four years earlier, CIA and other officials in Saigon might admire Diem's patriotism and personal integrity but were frustrated by his loss of the initiative to the Communists. The general decline of the government's position in the countryside directly affected Station equities when insurgent gains forced the termination of NRM training in the Delta.⁹ []

Facing an active insurgency in Vietnam, the Kennedy Administration did not turn its attention elsewhere as Eisenhower had. On the contrary, it made counterinsurgency and nation-building the heart of its Cold War strategy, with

⁶ FVST-2572, 10 March 1961, *ibid.*; FVS 4434, 11 April 1961, []

⁷ SAIG 3006, 10 May 1961, []

⁸ Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 129-130. []

⁹ Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 133; [] 7 June 1962, []

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Vietnam at center stage. This new emphasis—most visible, at first, in the expansion of the US Army Special Forces—encouraged CIA to look for ways to help reverse Communist advances in the South. []

John F. Kennedy's first Ambassador to Saigon, career diplomat Frederick Nolting, arrived with instructions to achieve a collegial relationship with Diem. Just as Ambassador Reinhardt had earlier substituted cooperation and forbearance for General Collins's skepticism and impatience, Nolting now replaced Durbrow's pessimism with a renewed quest for solutions. []

In this atmosphere, COS Colby's first proposal called for more of the Station's traditional approach in the form of a "pilot program" of political organization in the Delta province of Phong Dinh. This was actually the third such experiment in Phong Dinh, the NRM's president's home province. Colby's correspondence on the project, like that of his predecessors on earlier such efforts, talks about creating political mechanisms but says nothing about the political substance they were intended to propagate. In any case, whether despite or because of lessons learned from the earlier experiments, the first training cycle in the new "agit-prop" program did not get under way until a year later, in May 1962. By that time, this whole approach to nation-building had been eclipsed by the village defense programs that dominated US pacification strategy for the remainder of the Diem regime; indeed, until the GVN collapsed in 1975. The first of these programs emerged in mid-1961, when []

[] proposed to a Station contact that Rhadé tribesmen in the highlands province of Darlac be armed for local self-defense.¹⁰ []

A Strategy of Pre-Emptive Territorial Defense []

It was not that the Rhadé were clamoring to fight on the government side. Resettlement projects that Diem had launched in the Central Highlands in 1955 had severely disrupted the Montagnard way of life—the government had outlawed, among other things, the use of the traditional crossbow—and aggravated the perennial ethnic antagonism between the highland tribes and the lowland Vietnamese. Nor was the government eager to arm an antipathetic minority. But the Viet Cong were increasingly active in the High Plateau, where security was a perennial obsession with Diem, and at least some of the Rhadé also resented their intrusions.¹¹ []

¹⁰ FVST 2732, 9 June 1961, []

[] Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 89. []

¹¹ Unsigned "Report—Buon Enao Project," dated 8 May 1962, []

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Colby presented the opportunity to Nhu, who approved an experiment to be conducted jointly by CIA and the Vietnamese Special Forces. This cleared the way for [] to persuade the elders at the village of Buon Enao to cast their lot with Saigon. With a promise of Rhadé participation, CIA arranged for US Special Forces personnel to be detached to CIA to begin training the first of a series of self-defense units that a year later comprised some 35,000 men.¹² []

DCOS David Smith later gave Colonel Gilbert Layton credit for the program's success. As chief of the Station's paramilitary branch, Layton worked out the procedures and set the tone, putting heavy emphasis on helping the villagers preserve as much as possible of their traditional way of life. This could be taken to extremes, as in the case of a village inhabited by Black Thai, which needed a white buffalo for an important religious ceremony. None could be found in the area, so Layton's men immersed a conventionally-pigmented animal in a chlorine bleach solution for several days until its hide turned acceptably pale.¹³ []

The gratifying progress of village self-defense among the Montagnards, due in large part to this kind of respect for local usage, only cast in more prominent relief the absence of a similar program among lowland Vietnamese. At their weekly meetings in late 1961, Nhu and COS Colby continued trying to thrash out a more comprehensive pacification strategy. According to Colby's published account, Nhu was "stimulated by the fact that our discussions were of political strategies." But it was only after a number of these sessions that "the germ of the 'Strategic Hamlets' program had been born." Colby's subsequent descriptions of the Buon Enao and similar experiments provoked Nhu into looking at them as the potential basis for a "new Vietnamese social and political community...." By the end of 1961, Nhu had articulated the concept to the point of being "able to convince Diem to make a major national program" of it. Formal approval came with the creation of the Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets on 3 February 1962.¹⁴ []

Colby had competition for influence over Vietnamese thinking on pacification. While he and Nhu were theorizing about political community, Diem had invited Sir Robert Thompson, one of the architects of the counterinsurgency program in Malaya, to furnish a British perspective. By October 1961, Thompson had completed an assessment of the insurgency and on 13 November gave Diem a plan for the pacification of the Mekong Delta. October also saw the arrival in Saigon of the General Maxwell Taylor mission,

¹² Ibid.; Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 90-91. []

¹³ David Smith, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, Silver Spring, MD, tape recording, 6 October 1992 (hereafter cited as Smith interview). []

¹⁴ Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 85-101, passim; Senator Mike Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), III, p. 144. []

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which President Kennedy had dispatched to explore the deployment of US combat forces to Vietnam and to press for more aggressive pursuit of the war by the South Vietnamese. Thompson talked to Taylor, who subsequently asked for copies of the British concept papers. These had met a chilly reception from the US military in Saigon but were much better received in Washington, where Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, sent Kennedy a strategic plan consisting of "an unabashed restatement of most of Thompson's major points."¹⁵

As one *Pentagon Papers* historian saw it, Washington and much of the US Mission in Saigon liked the Strategic Hamlet concept because it responded to their perception of the insurgency as being political as well as military. Diem favored it because it promised additional US aid in a format that largely evaded the erosion of sovereignty implicit in Maxwell Taylor's new idea of "limited partnership" between US and Vietnamese authorities. It also appealed to him, the *Pentagon Papers* author speculated, because "it put achieving security before winning loyalty—in an operational context in which it was difficult to differentiate between security for the rural populace and control of that populace."¹⁶

With respect to substance, Colby saw not only Diem but Thompson as concerned primarily with centralized control of the rural population. Nhu agreed, at least about Thompson, whom he distrusted as having the outlook of a colonial administrator. Nhu and Colby, on the other hand, wanted the Strategic Hamlet to become the nucleus of an undefined new political system defending itself against what they saw as Viet Cong terrorism. Indeed, Nhu saw the Strategic Hamlet as the vehicle of a "social revolution." He used Communist terminology to tell a conference of province chiefs in December 1961 that upper class "lackeys of the imperialists and colonialists" should be overthrown in favor of "outstanding combattants" [sic] and poor farmers.¹⁷

But this conceptual difference had little effect on implementation. Because both perspectives assumed a peasantry looking for protection from the Communists, they both called for quarantine measures as the first phase of implementation. Once the guerrillas had been physically isolated from the population, the development aspects of the program could begin. In any case, whether Nhu talked Diem into launching the Strategic Hamlet program, as Colby claimed, or

¹⁵ Ibid., II, pp. 80, 139-142.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 146-147.

¹⁷ Colby interview, 16 October 1991; Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 99-100;

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whether Nhu was following the Diem-Thompson lead, he was free to implement his own version of it when Diem appointed him Chairman of the Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets in March 1962.¹⁸ [redacted]

While the Strategic Hamlet concept was evolving into a joint US-Vietnamese counterinsurgency program, Colby supervised the expansion of the Citizens' Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) in the High Plateau and experimented with political action in ethnic Vietnamese communities in the lowlands. In October 1961, Headquarters approved arming an additional 1,200 "Montagnard auxiliaries" in Kontum Province and granted [redacted] for civic action teams designed to provide local self-defense and improved village administration in lowland communities. In December, the first US Special Forces team detailed to the CIDG program arrived in Buon Enao.¹⁹ [redacted]

More Uncertainty About Diem's Prospects [redacted]

The gradual expansion of the CIA commitment to rural counterinsurgency—reflecting that of the US Government as a whole—took place with a watchful, perhaps hopeful, eye toward the emergence of new Vietnamese leadership. In October, for example, during the Taylor Mission, Station officer Harry Petersen pursued his contact with a group of "young Turks" in the government who were frustrated by its "archaic and unrealistic...bureaucratic procedures." FE Division Chief Desmond FitzGerald, in Saigon with the Taylor Group, authorized "more aggressive probing" for possible replacements should "Diem and his government disappear." The Station had a list of agents and other contacts on whom it might call in the event of a crisis, but worried that they might interpret its soundings as implying endorsement or the promise of support. FitzGerald, "while recognizing the problem, found no immediate solution." The soundings continued, apparently, but had to rely on an essentially passive style of elicitation.²⁰ [redacted]

¹⁸ In 1978, Colby attributed to Thompson and Diem an operative role in creating the program: "[T]he Saigon government was willing to move in the general direction that Thompson recommended and I was supporting. With Diem's approval, Nhu began to develop his plan." Later, in *Lost Victory*, Colby minimized the British role, claiming that, while Thompson "certainly influenced the process," he and Nhu had developed the concept that Nhu then sold to Diem. (See *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978], p.177; Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 99-100.) [redacted]

¹⁹ FVST 3037, 7 November 1961, [redacted] John A. McCone, DCI, Memorandum for Gordon Gray, Member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Memorandum, "History and Development of the Buon Enao Project," 28 August 1962, *ibid.*, Folder 3. When MACV took over management of CIDG in late 1963, it remained the program, changing "Citizens" to "Civilian" Irregular Defense Groups. [redacted]

²⁰ FVST 3037. [redacted]

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Station correspondence in the last months of Colby's tenure grew increasingly ambivalent about the outcome of the contest between Diem's government and the Viet Cong. In early December 1961, Colby attributed to Nhu a "petulant outburst" in the government-controlled press, reacting to the Taylor Mission's pressure for reforms. Colby said Nhu had provoked "a vast amount of speculation about the need for fundamental changes in the regime," changes that might very well be violent. The Station had been reporting on disarray in the Palace and had already undertaken to try to identify new leadership capable of replacing Diem. But when Senator Stuart Symington (D-MO) visited Saigon at this time, Colby took issue with his impression that Diem's loss of popular support had made a VC victory almost inevitable. Colby reported that he offered Symington "some other considerations" but did not say what these had been. Whatever their content, they seemed to reflect an essential optimism about the prospects of success. When FitzGerald told him in early 1962 that it was time to come home, Colby reacted by saying that he would have preferred another year in Saigon to finish what he had started. But FitzGerald insisted, and Colby became his deputy in FE Division until FitzGerald became DDP and Colby took over the Division.²¹ []

There were, in fact, at least transitory grounds for optimism. The introduction of attack by helicopter-borne infantry in early 1962 gained, if only briefly, the military initiative for the government. But Colby's optimism seems to have stemmed more from renewed faith in the vision and the leadership qualities of Diem and Nhu than from success on the battlefield. In January, he sent Headquarters a copy of notes taken by a visitor [] who had spent several hours with Diem just after the November 1960 coup attempt. Forty pages of a single-spaced typed manuscript summarize Diem's disquisition on topics ranging from a defense of compulsory labor to the illegitimate birth of various people in the political opposition. The authoritarianism is never concealed: if he doesn't "make the peasants work, they will revolt." Diem acknowledges no weaknesses, boasting of the moral superiority of his government while condemning Viet Cong cynicism, French perfidy, and US obtuseness and parsimony. The press gets particular attention, its coverage of the 1960 military coup attempt decried as a "criminal aberration."²² []

Colby worried that the notes might make Diem look guilty of "bad faith or irrationality," saying he had held them hoping to find time to write an interpretative piece to send with them. He urged Headquarters to judge Diem not by selected phrases but by "the whole picture that he is trying to present in these conversations." Implicitly endorsing this picture, Colby ended by suggesting

²¹ [] 7 December 1961; FVST 3126, 9 December 1961, [] Colby interview, 16 October 1991. []

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that Diem might be furnished a tape recorder to begin a memoir like the one recently done by Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter; this, he thought, might well be supplemented by finding Diem an "intelligent biographer." Colby did not explain how a Diem memoir or biography might make the regime more competitive with the Viet Cong, and neither project ever came to fruition.²³

Diem and Nhu on Strategy and Tactics

Colby continued his meetings with Diem and Nhu during the early months of 1962, and the record of these contacts provides unique insights into the brothers' perceptions of the nature of the struggle and of the way to pursue it. Essentially, the sessions with Diem confirmed the unrelieved authoritarianism of his governing style, while those with Nhu revealed his growing recognition of the government's strategic dilemma. Talking to Colby in late February about security in the Highlands, Diem dismissed any notion of a political problem with the tribes there, calling them "unstable and childlike." So far as the President was concerned, they needed to be "treated as a stern father would, giving them very precise directions and rewards and punishment." That this condescension extended beyond the mountain tribes to include certain ethnic Vietnamese emerged in Diem's stated preference for Central Vietnamese refugees in resettlement projects because of the "usual weaknesses of Southerners."²⁴

In addition to paternalism Diem's ignorance of the way things actually work led him to ignore the practical difficulties of implementing his proposed rural security arrangements. With his sense of mission apparently intact after two disaffected Vietnamese Air Force pilots bombed the Palace in late February, he lectured Colby on resettlement of ethnic Vietnamese villagers onto the High Plateau. His formula assumed that the VC could only enter hamlet enjoying a government presence by force. The village's Civil Guard detachment would resist any small incursion but would melt away with the civilians if a larger VC unit attacked. Even then, it would still be able to "estimate" the route by which the VC unit would withdraw, and to set up an ambush.²⁵

Nhu was equally offhand in taking for granted the Vietnamese villager's antipathy to Communism, and in assuming that his policy prescriptions would actually work. In March, he assured Colby and the visiting Desmond Fitzgerald that over 10,000 Strategic Hamlets would be completed in 1962, and he echoed Diem's confidence that the inhabitants of villages attacked by the VC

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ FVS 7130, 7 March 1962,

²⁵ Ibid.

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could simply "disappear into the countryside." They would first "secrete their valuables" in a place which out of respect for the farmer's "personalist right" would be unknown to government officials. And if the VC burned a man's house, the government would build him a new one.²⁶ []

Nhu seems to have assumed in this that South Vietnamese civil servants possessed precisely the dedication and competence he had continually claimed they lacked in meetings with his CIA interlocutors. But Nhu had never displayed much understanding of organizational mechanics; as Colby put it, he had "no sense of the reality" of problems at the implementation level. Nevertheless, if he greatly overestimated the capacity of his bureaucracy to respond to continually changing policy, Nhu occasionally penetrated to the heart of the problem in a way never achieved by President Diem. In a discussion of the Strategic Hamlet program with Colby, Nhu recognized that the government had to confront the material issues that concerned the rural population, and he acknowledged that the application of the government's land tenure laws, which favored the owners of large holdings, drove many peasants into the arms of the VC.²⁷ []

Apparently referring to the influence of landowners in the National Assembly, Nhu said that the prospects of new legislation were poor. Looking for a way around this obstacle, he outlined for Colby an idea suggesting some understanding of the Viet Cong technique of winning peasant loyalty with a calculated blend of positive and negative incentives. Recognizing the damage done to Saigon's image when the government annulled VC land redistribution, Nhu suggested a scheme whereby peasants holding land under the VC dispensation might hold it provisionally, perhaps for 90 days, while they induced relatives in the VC to bring in their weapons and change sides. But Nhu did not address the legal problem of making this tenure permanent, and in practice the government continued to labor under the burden of a regressive land tenure policy.²⁸ []

At this same meeting, Nhu stressed one of his favorite themes, the need for self-sufficiency at the hamlet and village level. Weapons for self-defense, for example, should be loaned to the village for six months, at which point the local militia should have captured its own from the Viet Cong. Colby thought this approach abdicated an opportunity for the government to use American

²⁶ The record contains no acknowledgment by Nhu or the Station of the forcible relocation of villagers that accompanied the construction that month of the first Strategic Hamlet built with US participation. Gravel, *Pentagon Papers, II*, p. 149; FVS 7159, 14 March 1962; []

²⁷ Colby interview, 16 October 1991; FVS 6938, 16 January 1962; []

²⁸ FVS 6938; Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), passim. []

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material support to sell the program to the villagers. But Nhu insisted on a minimum of US aid and won Diem's support for his position. Years later, Colby recalled this as the one example in his own experience with Nhu of the malign influence that many observers claimed Nhu had always exerted on the President.²⁹ [redacted]

The House of Ngo Divided [redacted]

While Nhu instructed Colby in pacification strategy, the Station proceeded in spring 1962 to refine and expand the paramilitary programs that had preceded and now complemented the larger Strategic Hamlet program. At the same time, it was looking over its shoulder at the South Vietnamese military, much of which the Station suspected of being still disaffected if not positively mutinous. Thus, on the action side, the Station was supporting training courses for civic action teams and Nhu's Republican Youth, in effect a replacement for the NRM, and refining the CIDG program. For information on the Army's mood, Colby supplemented conventional agent operations by assigning Russ Miller to take soundings among his many contacts in the military. Miller later recalled that, owing perhaps to the need to avoid looking as if he were encouraging sedition, he got nothing more serious than routine barracks griping.³⁰ [redacted]

If the threat of a military coup had receded, there was no lack of tension within the Ngo family itself. By April, it had reached the point that Nhu no longer felt the need to give his brother unquestioning obedience. He told one Station source about several non-attributable propaganda operations he had just approved, cautioning him not to tell Diem, who would have objected. He mentioned other areas of disagreement with the President and said that Diem, often critical of other people, had now started complaining about him.³¹ Another report said that Nhu and Can had a bitter argument over Strategic Hamlets in early June, the outcome of which was Can's withdrawal of local military support for the program in Central Vietnam.³² [redacted]

²⁹ FVS 6938; Colby interview, 16 October 1991. [redacted]

³⁰ FVST 3565, 15 May 62, [redacted] Miller interview, 5 November 1991. [redacted]

³¹ The mutual backbiting of Diem's subordinates exploited this tendency. A few months earlier, "Big" Minh had complained that Nguyen Khanh was vilifying him at the Palace. As a result, Diem reprimanded Minh for "laziness," and Minh complained to a colleague [redacted] that Khanh was "like a child" in his misrepresentation to Diem of Minh's problems. FVS 7036, 8 February 1962. [redacted]

³² FVS 7325, 25 April 1962, [redacted]

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In this climate, DCI John McCone and DDP Richard Helms visited Saigon in early June. No record survives of any meeting with the President, but Ngo Dinh Nhu treated the visitors to a discourse on the "paralysis of fear" that the "mammoth population" of Communist China inspired in all its Southeast Asian neighbors except the Vietnamese and the Meo tribesmen of Laos. He professed optimism about the Strategic Hamlet program and praised the introduction of heliborne operations into the war against the Viet Cong. He described the rallying of the mountain tribes to the government as "our greatest success of the last two years" without crediting the initiative to the CIA. Nhu called for more defoliation in the Central Highlands, partly to starve out the VC and partly to force more Montagnards into accepting government protection.³³

John Richardson, who replaced William Colby in June 1962, soon followed up on the McCone-Helms visit by soliciting his first private meeting with Nhu. The new COS was pleasantly surprised at the degree of give-and-take, although Nhu "dominated the discussion throughout and carried, by far and away, the most of the conversation [sic]." At this session, Nhu waxed critical of Diem's approach to the insurgency and expressed less confidence than he had with the DCI that the peasants longed for physical protection from the VC. Nhu worried that they had no particular reason to prefer the "oligarchic, corrupt, bourgeois" Saigon government, which deserved to be swept away if it could not develop a "more 'revolutionary' quality." He blamed Diem for emphasizing large-scale projects—massive resettlement, dams, highways—that made little immediate contribution to solving local problems or countering the appeal of the Viet Cong.³⁴

It seems that Nhu's attitude toward the government's obligations to its rural constituency had in fact undergone a second transformation. From the relatively liberal approach of 1954 and 1955, while launching the NRM with Paul Harwood's help, he came in 1958 to dismiss the very possibility of the government's ingratiating itself with the peasant. By 1962, in talks not only with Colby and Richardson but with his labor confidant Tran Quoc Buu, he appeared genuinely to have accepted the notion that winning the farmer's voluntary loyalty was indispensable to victory over the Viet Cong. Certainly, he impressed Richardson. The COS wrote after their late June meeting that Nhu's "theoretical analysis seemed to me to be practical" and that his "view of human nature, which is basic to political and social concepts, is shrewd and realistic."³⁵

³³ John H. Richardson, Memorandum for the Record, "Visit with Counselor Ngo Dinh Nhu at Gia Long Palace on 7 June 1962," 7 June 1962,

³⁴ FVSA 13879, 28 June 1962,

³⁵ Ibid.

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Recognition of the need for active peasant loyalty was a notion with which no US official would argue. Oddly, Richardson was equally receptive to Nhu's exposition of an esoteric doctrine called personalism. The COS summarized his understanding of this theory, which Nhu had adapted from the work of the French thinker Emmanuel Mounier, by saying that it:

places the problems of underdevelopment on a primary basis of personal liberty and a free or somewhat modified, free enterprise system. The element of personal independence and personal achievement, combined with appropriate community interest, was stressed.

How the conflicting equities implied in this vague formulation were to be reconciled, Nhu apparently did not say. On a more practical level, Richardson thought Nhu to be "expanding and perhaps consolidating his political power behind the scenes and under the shadow of President Diem." He did not explain his belief that Nhu's "theoretical and intellectual effort relates very much to the practicalities of national and personal power," but made it clear that he thought Nhu "clever and rather subtle. I would certainly not be inclined to take him lightly for a moment."³⁶

A month later, Richardson was still impressed with the cogency of Nhu's theoretical argument: "I found his observations on the possibilities of the Strategic Hamlet program to be quite far-reaching." Nhu was beginning, at this point, to offer the COS some insight into the personal styles of the Ngo family, and to contrast Diem's personality with his own. Recalling his own youthful feelings, Nhu thought young men should be relatively easily motivated to fight "an adventurous guerrilla war" in irregular local units. Richardson asked how Diem felt about this, and Nhu said the President had no comprehension of the "aspirations of youth" because he had "never been a young man."³⁷

During the first months of their association, Richardson paraphrased Nhu's theorizing in his sympathetic accounts to Headquarters. In August, for example, he gave Headquarters a detailed account of a meeting at which Nhu analyzed the ideological structure of the "occidental countries" and offered an interpretation of Western society that emphasized its moral decay.³⁸ In September, Nhu wrote to Richardson to introduce his "grand design" for a

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ FVSA T3943, 16 July 1962,

³⁸ An extract from Richardson's paraphrase gives the flavor of Nhu's intellectual style: "Occidental countries had for their structure: Capitalism; for their ideology: Liberalism; for their ethic: the Hero and the Saint. This complex of cultural patterns and values had been produced causally by a combination of classical Greek mathematics and logic plus the Evangelical Message."

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"guerrilla infrastructure" composed of the Strategic Hamlet program and a guerrilla organization "compartmented from the population." Nhu was vague about the structure and mission of the guerrilla element, describing it mainly in terms of its members' spiritual values, but he explicitly distinguished it from both local self-defense units and the counter guerrilla forces of the regular Army.³⁹ []

Richardson replied that he found himself "in full agreement" with Nhu's letter. He went on to suggest, as a means to their common goal, military options like Special Forces operations and air strikes, which Nhu had seemingly excluded from his new concept. In retrospect, Nhu seems to have been thinking more about the problem of motivating the anti-VC struggle than about military organization and tactics. But his vague, almost mystical, language never addressed or even acknowledged the problem of implementation, and it is easy to see why Richardson might have interpreted the "grand design" in a more concrete, if apparently mistaken, frame of reference.⁴⁰ []

In any case, whatever the extent to which he understood and shared Nhu's perception of the nature of the conflict, Richardson saw his responsibility at this time as one of support to the US military. Referring to anticipated VC use of the border with Laos and Cambodia to support regimental-size operations, the COS noted that "General Harkins has consistently called attention to the need for more counteraction along these border areas." Richardson proposed to respond by expanding the Station's village defense program to the border area, and by deploying larger numbers of Montagnards for intelligence and paramilitary purposes. In so doing, he implicitly accepted responsibility for what seems in hindsight to have been one of the genuinely military aspects of the insurgency. At the same time, he opened the door to the militarization of the CIDG program, in which the emphasis on consolidating the Montagnard commitment to the Saigon government through a system of territorial defense gradually gave way to the deployment of CIDG irregulars against regular Viet Cong combat formations.⁴¹ []

Richardson seemed confident that government military operations could start making inroads on Communist-controlled territory. He recommended accelerated irregular operations in the Highlands and called for the recapture of Binh Duong Province, a VC stronghold just north of Saigon: "I believe the

³⁹ Attachment to FVST 4002, 30 August 1962; Attachment 1 to FVST 4031, 6 September 1962; []

⁴⁰ Attachment 2 to FVST 4031. []

⁴¹ Attachment 3 to FVST 4031. []

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time has come when we should no longer accept the thought that the Viet Cong need to be allowed to retain more or less stable and semi-permanent safe haven areas or bases in South Vietnam."⁴² []

In pursuit of this aggressive line, the COS sought to consolidate Nhu's approval of the Highland programs, sending him a report in early August that described the active commitment of 30,000 Rhade tribesmen—one-third the total—to the government and against the VC. Richardson also occasionally had to try to change Nhu's mind on something, usually without succeeding. In September, meeting at Nhu's invitation, he relayed Headquarters' renewed anxiety about Vietnamese plans to try to depose Prince Sihanouk. Nhu rejected the US argument, although, as he had earlier done with COS Natsios, he disclaimed any intention to interfere in Cambodia.⁴³ []

The Leadership Question Renewed []

A meeting on 18 October 1962 illustrates Richardson's dilemma as he tried both to indulge Nhu's increasingly grandiose thinking and to address the practical concerns of an operating CIA Station. Nhu dominated the session by laying out another strategy, proposing this time to cut VC lines to the North with a "commando effort aimed at achieving control...over Viet Cong safehavens, strong points, and routes of travel along the ridges of the Annamite mountain chain." Richardson apparently did not question this vision of Communist infiltrators negotiating the mountaintops of Central Vietnam but did get the subject changed to the continuing problems with Vietnamese intelligence. He reminded Nhu that the Central Intelligence Organization had no budget and that its chief refused to give him VC order-of-battle information without Palace authorization. Grandiloquent on theoretical matters, "Nhu did not comment" on either of these issues.⁴⁴ []

In his meetings with the Station in October, Nhu revealed his conflicted state of mind with contradictory talk about corruption and family rule. At one point he insisted to Richardson that "if Diem does nothing more than to crush corruption in South Vietnam he will have accomplished enough." But he acknowledged that corruption was still endemic and complained two weeks later that three-quarters of the National Police were "corrupt, ineffective, or untrained." Far from acknowledging the possibility that family rule might

⁴² Attachment 2, FVST 4031. []

⁴³ John Richardson, Letter to Ngo Dinh Nhu, 3 August 1962, []
[] FVSA 14435, 24 October 1962, []

⁴⁴ FVSA 14405, 23 October 1962, []

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foster corruption and incompetence, he claimed that "only in the midst of general corruption" did Diem turn to the family; Nhu "flatly rejected the idea that effective and honest Vietnamese" were being denied responsible jobs.⁴⁵ [redacted]

At this point, in late 1962, some observers outside CIA, many but not all of them journalists, began to impute to Nhu calculated anti-Americanism or even mental illness. John Mecklin, the US Embassy's Public Affairs Officer, thought Nhu was displaying overt hostility to Americans. He suggested at one point that Nhu might be psychotic. Agency contacts did not share either perception. [redacted] Paul Harwood, provided a different perspective on this still-contentious topic. [redacted] in the early 1960s, [redacted]

[redacted] The last such encounter took place in late 1962, and Harwood found Nhu discouraged and fatalistic. Nhu's comportment did not, however, suggest to the Harwoods either any psychological imbalance or the drug use that was later imputed to him by various American journalists.⁴⁶ [redacted]

Richardson, for his part, had just come from a five-hour session with the President when he described Diem and Nhu on 15 November as "tough-minded realists with Diem perhaps having more force of personality and more concentrated drive." The COS dismissed the notion that Nhu dominated Diem, saying that of the President's "continued dominance as a man and as a national leader, I have no doubt." Diem took the trouble to explain his own role in the development of the Strategic Hamlet concept. He said that he had vetted it with ex-Viet Minh—he found them too preoccupied with fortifications—and had then personally supervised the pilot project in the onetime Viet Minh stronghold of Quang Ngai. Otherwise, his topics would have been familiar to any of his earlier American interlocutors; they included personal reminiscence and gossip, the perfidious French, and the shortcomings of US strategic thought.⁴⁷ [redacted]

⁴⁵ FVS 8032, 11 October 1962; FVS 8092, 25 October 1962; [redacted]

⁴⁶ The familiarity of the relationship between the two couples is suggested by an incident a year or so earlier, when the Nhus' daughter Le Thuy called from Rome to ask if she could stay with the Harwoods [redacted] They acceded, and she came. Only when the Vietnamese Ambassador called to inquire did the Harwoods discover that the girl had not told her parents of her destination; Madame Nhu had simply guessed she might be there and sent word that it was all right for her to stay. Harwood interview, 27 March 1991; *FRUS, 1961-63, II, Vietnam, 1962*, p. 744. [redacted]

⁴⁷ John Richardson, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting with President Ngo Dinh Diem on 14 November 1962," 15 November 1962, [redacted]

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Unburdened by doubts about the Ngo brothers' stability and competence, and still hoping to bolster the regime's reputation in both Vietnam and the US, FE Division Chief Colby cabled a suggestion that Nhu write an article for the Foreign Affairs quarterly. Richardson reacted enthusiastically, writing in late December that, as the father of the Strategic Hamlet program, Nhu had much of general interest to say. In the prestigious forum offered by Foreign Affairs, he might contribute both to Vietnamese national pride and to the momentum of the program. Such an article could answer people who wondered whether the war was winnable, whether Diem was supplementing military means with an "acceptable social and politico-economic program," and whether he was "winning the people." It might counter the impression that Diem's was nothing but a "right wing, authoritarian, bigoted administration." And finally, "we might be able to get away a little from the image of Nhu as representing no more than a talkative intellectual or a sinister, if not malevolent, intrigant...in my opinion a most unjustified reputation."⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ FVSA 14802, 21 December 1962;

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CHAPTER 12

"This Coup is Finished"

It is not clear whether Richardson ever asked Nhu to do the Foreign Affairs article, but this project, like the proposed Diem memoirs and biography, came to nothing. In any case, Colby and Richardson seem to have overlooked that the fading reputations of the Ngo brothers derived less from inadequate public relations than from their government's increasingly tenuous hold on its people. In the countryside, the Viet Cong had regained the initiative after learning how to cope with ARVN heliborne attacks. In early January 1963, for example, the Viet Cong inflicted heavy losses on a superior ARVN force at Ap Bac, a hamlet in the Mekong Delta near My Tho. The VC eventually withdrew without opposition, whereupon General Paul Harkins, MACV commander, proclaimed an ARVN victory. Ngo Dinh Nhu took a similar line with Richardson, insisting that Ap Bac was not a government defeat, merely a partial victory. Exuding confidence in his command of military tactics, he prescribed down to the number of preparatory artillery rounds how ARVN should have fought the battle.¹

During this same meeting, Nhu reflected an understanding of ARVN strategy very different from that of American advisors in the field. He criticized what he described as Diem's insistence on "frontal attack and constant maintenance of the initiative in aggressive troop actions." This seems to be precisely what had been lacking at Ap Bac, but Nhu did not acknowledge it. Instead, he proceeded to lecture Richardson on the proper use of artillery and on the strategy of attrition that he thought would "wear down the enemy by envelopment."²

¹ George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1987), pp. 142-143;

² John Paul Vann, already perhaps the most influential US advisor to the Vietnamese military, believed in late 1962 that Diem had ordered his commanders to avoid offensive operations that risked significant ARVN casualties. He thought Diem saw excessive casualties as the main grievance of the officers who staged the 1960 mutiny, and that he was determined to avoid further alienating the ARVN leadership (see Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* New York: Random House, 1988, 122-124).

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Again, while Nhu theorized, implementation languished. In early January, for example, a Station agent reported that Nhu's confidence in the Strategic Hamlets in Lam Dong Province, in Central Vietnam, was misplaced. The agent insisted that their inhabitants were not trustworthy, and not even civic action cadres could circulate in them without an armed escort.³ []

But official reporting, both Vietnamese and American, was more optimistic, and Richardson continued to believe that the Strategic Hamlet program was progressing well, in Central Vietnam if not in the Delta. In his own domain, however, that of collecting intelligence on the Viet Cong, the COS was encountering only frustration as he continued the perennial CIA campaign to win Palace agreement to run joint operations and share VC order-of-battle information. []

A Continuing Impasse over Joint Operations []

This issue had ostensibly been resolved in May 1962, when after months of intensive working-level negotiations with the Station, President Diem announced the creation of the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), []

[]
Given the self-evident need for better intelligence on the insurgency and on the North, []
the Station saw reason to believe that it had finally reduced Diem's resistance to genuine collaboration. On 10 January, Diem finally approved the first CIO budget until 10 January, and launched a reorganization of his intelligence and security services that incorporated several Station recommendations. []

[]
John Richardson's chief of liaison, Paul Hodges, reported that the number of joint operations, presumably with all services, had risen from seven to 25. These seem to have represented low-level penetrations, judging by results which the Station described in terms of arrests, combat action, and the discovery of a VC refuge in a tunnel, but the quantitative improvement was encouraging. This modest progress encouraged Hodges to regard 1962 as a year of training and reorganization, with its fruit to be harvested in 1963.⁵ []

³ FVS 8340, 3 January 1963, []
⁴ SAIG 4743, 10 January 1963, []
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Less patient than Hodges, John Richardson wrote to Nhu in mid-January. He complained that nominally joint collection activities with the Special Branch totaled fewer than twenty, and that the police denied having the authority to share the product even of these. A month later, Nhu had not replied or reacted in any way.⁶ []

A frustrated Richardson now took the unusual step of having Hodges complain to Ngo Dinh Can's major domo in Hue about Nhu's failure to respond. Can relayed a cool reply to the effect that the Station would have done better to get the Ambassador to raise the matter informally with President Diem. The Station then suddenly found itself flooded with reporting from the services with which it aspired to run more joint operations. Hodges recognized this as an intentional and unsatisfactory substitute for the access to sources that joint activity would have conferred, and in March he ruefully noted that he had "gradually and reluctantly" come to accept that the Vietnamese were using the CIO as a device to keep the Americans away from the intelligence activities they really cared about, namely, those of the Police Special Branch.⁷ []

Deputy Defense Minister Tran Trung Dung kept the merry-go-round turning when he assured John Richardson that the military intelligence services would share with CIA all their reporting on the VC. At this session, probably during the first week in April, he disclaimed any influence over the CIO and the police, but a little later told the visiting Bill Colby that President Diem had finally authorized joint operations with both CIO and the Special Branch. This too came to nothing, and Paul Hodges's bleak assessment lost none of its validity.⁸ []

The Diem Regime Under Siege []

Agent reports of Nhu's growing anti-Americanism multiplied in February and March, and in his contacts with the COS Nhu condemned those who had "betrayed" the President. The traitors included former Diem confidant Wesley Fishel of Michigan State University, now a critic whom Nhu accused of "a woman's fickleness and inconstancy" and Nhu's father-in-law, Tran Van Chuong. Other reporting said Nhu held the US responsible for the mutiny of late 1960 and the Palace bombing of February 1962, and that he now

⁶ John Richardson, "The Coup d'Etat of November 1963 and its Aftermath" (a lecture prepared for presentation to the FSI Special Course on Vietnam on 27 October 1964), East Asia Division Historical File, CIA History Staff; FVSA 15048, 12 February 1963, []

⁷ FVSA 15142, 27 February 1963, [] Paul Hodges, Memorandum to Chief of Station, "Briefing Notes for Colby's Visit," 15 March 1963, ibid, []

⁸ FVST 5223, 8 April 1963, []

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entertained the idea of replacing Diem as President. Richardson periodically took issue with Nhu's accusations, but did not report any success in changing Nhu's mind.⁹ []

If Nhu's behavior suggested paranoia, his wife showed signs of megalomania. An intelligence report described her browbeating Diem into letting her pick 30 candidates for the approaching National Assembly election. Diem lost again when he tried to replace her with Vice President Tho as principal speaker at the Trung Sisters Day ceremony; she "ranted and raved" until he gave in. The Nhus' behavior provided an incentive for the Station to maintain its contacts with opposition politicians. But these contacts illustrated the long-standing problem of trying to reform the regime through oppositionists who wanted simply to replace it. In one such effort to square the circle, the Station described an agent's new political manifesto as "critical of the regime, but not too inflammatory."¹⁰ []

The Station was everywhere in the spring of 1963. It was the only element of the US Mission to have contacts in all the politically active non-Communist elements in South Vietnamese society. While Richardson continued his meetings with Ngo Dinh Nhu, junior Station officers were solidifying clandestine links with the opposition. []

On 8 May, Buddhist crowds in Hue rioted over alleged religious discrimination by the government and launched the movement that six months later brought down the Diem regime. Within two days, the Station had officers in touch with dissident Buddhist leader Tri Quang. After a three-hour meeting, they described him as self-confident, dominating, committed, and slippery, but able to make a joke and take one at his own expense. He would neither admit nor deny that his goal was to destroy Diem. Station officer Carroll Ingram, hoping to learn more about his intentions, maintained periodic contact with him at least until early September.¹² []

⁹ FVST 4964, 1 March 1963, and passim, []

¹⁰ FVS 8864, 2 May 1963, [] FVST 5018, 7 March 1963, []

¹¹ FVSA 15634, 17 April 1963, [] Douglas Blaufarb, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, Lewes, WV, 16 November 1989 (hereafter cited as Blaufarb interview, 16 November 1989). Blaufarb was DCOS in Saigon from 1956 to 1958, the period in which the Station began a concerted effort to recruit among the non-Communist opposition. []

¹² SAIG 0540, 2 September 1963, []

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The confused state of Nhu's relations with the US at this time is reflected in a report of an offer by a Viet Cong agent to serve as intermediary between him and the Americans. The agent, Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, was even then widely suspected of Communist connections, but his versatile mind and powerful personality overcame any doubts at the Palace, and he became Military Advisor at the Presidency. In April, he told a Station agent that he had commiserated with Nhu on deteriorating relations with the US. Nhu and the Americans, he said, misunderstood each other's concepts of government. Thao thought he understood both and offered to serve as an "interpreter of ideas." Nhu, he said, took the idea "under advisement."¹³ []

Nhu's preoccupation with American intentions emerged again in May. Talking to a *Washington Post* reporter, he proclaimed the best of personal relations with the CIA, but insisted that "some Americans" were behind the attempted military coup in November 1960. In this context, he alluded to the episode that ended with the departure of Station officer George Carver. [] [] had at this time an even stronger impression of a paranoid atmosphere in the Palace. [] concluded that Nhu's obsession had produced a government more concerned with protecting itself from the US than with defeating the Viet Cong. The source claimed that Nhu thought the Americans had set a recent series of fires in Saigon, and that "in some matters" they worked with the VC.¹⁴ []

Rumors circulated in mid-1963 that Nhu was exploring with Hanoi the possibility of a deal. Deputy COS David Smith, for one, accepted the allegation as probably true, although no well-sourced clandestine reporting ever confirmed it. In Smith's view, Nhu would not have been true to his own nature had he not tried to take out insurance against a definitive break with the US.¹⁵ []

Despite the tension generated by US objections to Saigon's handling of Buddhist unrest, Nhu brought a conciliatory approach to a meeting with Richardson on 25 June. Perhaps seeking to restore some semblance of a cooperative atmosphere, he announced that Diem had finally approved a longstanding Station request for combat intelligence team operations into Laos. But on the subject of the Buddhists, Richardson found Nhu in "a state of emotional shock and...in a dangerous frame of mind." Nhu bitterly denounced Diem's recent modest concessions to the Buddhists: "I don't give a damn about my brother. ...If a government is incapable of applying the law, it should fall." Nhu

¹³ Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath* (Vintage Books, 1986), chap. 6; FBS 8816, 23 April 1963, []

¹⁴ Articles by Warren Uuna, *Washington Post*, 12 and 13 May 1963; FSS 12843, 10 May 1963; []

¹⁵ Smith interview. Smith had served with Edward Lansdale's Saigon Military Station, 1954-1955, and returned as DCOS in mid-1962. []

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described the regime as ineffectually "mandarin and feudal" and said he would rather go into opposition than accept "a servile instrument under foreign domination."¹⁶ []

Richardson left convinced that Nhu would in fact seek the presidency, whatever the circumstances of Diem's departure, and in so doing might not accurately assess his chances of success. But the COS also perceived a more complicated motivation than Nhu was often granted: "There is the ambivalence of desire for a modus vivendi with the Americans and a resistance to what he considers illegitimate intervention."¹⁷ []

As Richardson was monitoring the atmosphere in the Palace, [] [] tried to soften Washington's reaction to Vietnamese intransigence. Attending a June meeting of the National Security Council's Executive committee (ExComm), William Colby listened to the excoriations of Diem and Nhu and was moved to scribble a note, the burden of which was that we might do better to "negotiate" with Nhu rather than lock ourselves into an adversarial stance. He slipped it to DCI McCone, who read it and passed it around the room. Colby hoped it might stimulate someone into suggesting him as the negotiator, but no one even acknowledged it with a comment.¹⁸ []

A Hesitant Exploration of Alternatives []

By late June, Station soundings of the non-Communist opposition were producing indications of coup planning.¹⁹ One of these contacts highlighted in poignant fashion the difficulty, noted earlier, of taking a policy line with oppositionists when the policy itself is painfully ambivalent. On the 28th, Tran Kim Tuyen, disaffected former Chief of SEPES, the Can Lao Party's intelligence and security organ, met [] former Saigon DCOS and Tuyen's liaison contact, [] He reviled the Diem regime, and although he denied any role in coup plotting, other sources reporting on the same day claimed he was involved.²⁰ []

[] saw him again the next day and took an uncompromising line against a coup: the US stood firmly behind the regime and hoped to influence it in the right direction; a "rash attempt to knock it over" would benefit only

¹⁶ FVSA 16103, 26 June 1963, []

¹⁷ Ibid. []

¹⁸ Colby interview, 16 October 1991. []

¹⁹ The very process of taking these soundings produced anxiety at State. Headquarters told the Station that Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, worried that the Station's "'scourrying' around and frantic effort might further unbalance a delicate situation." Headquarters said it had given the appropriate reassurances and thought it had Hilsman's implicit approval to continue. []

²⁰ Blind Memorandum, "Tran Kim Tuyen's Views of the Diem Regime," 1 July 1963, *ibid.* []

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the Viet Cong. Tuyen responded by noting how the US had stood back when ARVN elements mutinied in November 1960 and implied that he expected the same reaction to any future coup attempt. [redacted] repudiated this notion, asserting that there was now more at stake, and apparently suggesting that the US might act to prevent or defeat a coup.²¹ [redacted]

Headquarters reacted by directing Saigon to get the Embassy's endorsement or correction of this prescription. The highly equivocal Embassy response agreed that [redacted] should represent the US as "flatly opposed" to a coup. It was judged excessive, on the other hand, to deny the existence of any alternative to Diem, or to suggest that the US might intervene against a coup.²² [redacted]

The Tuyen imbroglio raised a second dilemma, that of collusion with self-proclaimed rebels when the US had not even secretly repudiated the Diem government and still wanted to reform it. During the cable exchange on what to tell Tuyen, Saigon Station gave Headquarters the impression it might inform the Palace about his approach in [redacted]. Responding to an alarmed query, the Station gave assurances that it harbored no such intention. Headquarters followed with general guidance, in which the State Department concurred, that sources should be protected until and unless in Station and Embassy judgment their information "poses a clear and present danger to US interests." Even then, Headquarters was to be advised before the Station took any action.²³ [redacted]

This formula governed the Station's response to the first intimation by Diem's generals that active coup plotting was already a fact. Breaking precedent, Diem had allowed all his flag officers to attend the US Embassy's Fourth of July reception. Lucien (Lou) Conein, a Station officer [redacted] [redacted] joined several of the generals when they left the reception for drinks at a downtown hotel. There, General Tran Van Don informed him that he and other officers intended to remove the President. Conein informed John Richardson and Ambassador Lodge, who instructed him to use the contact to monitor the generals' plans.²⁴ [redacted]

The generals' conspiracy and the Tuyen group formed only two branches of the dense tangle of plot and counterplot that sprang up in the summer of 1963. In its efforts to trace these contorted developments, the Station used recruited agents, informal unilateral contacts, and its official liaison counterparts. Sources in all three categories reported on Nhu's Byzantine performance on

²¹ Ibid. [redacted]

²² [redacted] and SAIG 8924, 2 July 1963, both in [redacted]

²³ Ibid. [redacted]

²⁴ Note to the author from Lucien Conein, November 1995. [redacted]

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11 July, when he convoked all available ARVN generals to a session at which he accused Diem of having lost touch with events and went on to appeal for the support of the armed forces. As General Nguyen Khanh told it to the Station, Nhu promised to dissociate himself and his wife from Diem and his other brothers and assured the generals that they would all get responsible jobs in the government. Khanh said that Nhu seemed to persuade most of the generals of his sincerity, and General Tran Van Minh [redacted] he thought Nhu was planning a coup against Diem.²⁵ [redacted]

Seeing Nhu on the 19th, Richardson inquired about the meeting with the generals.²⁶ Nhu said nothing about his appeal for ARVN support, but expatiated on his use of the session to help the "dissatisfied, confused...agitated" generals through a "kind of 'psychoanalytic' procedure...to try to surface some of the problems they had been brooding about inwardly." Nhu said he discussed the coup d'état as a feature of politics in an "underdeveloped state" and told the COS he surmised that some in his audience thought he was trying to unmask potential rebels. Richardson accepted Nhu's own explanation—that he was simply trying to communicate with the generals. But Nhu "would inevitably do this in an elliptical, ambiguous, and round-robin way," and the result would be confusion on a scale sufficient to explain the various conflicting accounts.²⁷ [redacted]

Even before Nhu's seance with the generals, the Station had begun examining the constitutional propriety of Nhu's succeeding to the presidency and the circumstances in which he might try to seize national leadership. He faced many obstacles, the greatest being public antipathy for Madame Nhu, and the Station was of two minds about his prospects. On the one hand, he was the second most powerful figure in Vietnam. On the other, it seemed unlikely that he could control the senior military in Diem's absence. The Station said it was working on a contingency plan designed to promote Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho to the presidency, should Diem fall and Washington decide to oppose a Nhu succession.²⁸ [redacted]

On 22 July, Headquarters ruled out Nhu as an acceptable replacement for Diem. No matter the circumstances under which Diem might leave, the Station should promote Vice President Tho as his successor, if necessary only as a figurehead. But Washington, disillusioned with the performance of military juntas elsewhere, hoped he would provide genuine leadership.²⁹ [redacted]

²⁵ "Tran Kim Tuyen's Views:" [redacted]

²⁶ It is not known whether the fact of the meeting had then become public knowledge and, if not, what pretext Richardson used to raise the matter. [redacted]

²⁷ FVSA 16220, 20 July 1963, [redacted]

²⁸ FVSA 16116, 1 July 1963, [redacted] The plan has not been found. [redacted]

²⁹ [redacted]

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Having spread to all the major cities of South Vietnam, the Buddhist crisis continued to preempt policy-level attention, and Washington called on the Embassy and the Station to serve as channels of both information and attempted influence. At a meeting requested by Nhu in early August, Richardson explored the Buddhist issue under instructions from Ambassador Nolting. Nhu made the improbable claim that Ngo Dinh Can had "lost all moral authority" in Central Vietnam by his excessively lenient treatment of the Buddhists. Nhu then denied any knowledge of what Richardson told him were cases of "terrorism" against Buddhists in Can's domain. Finally, he dismissed Richardson's suggestion that Diem try to defuse religious tension by meeting with a moderate Buddhist leader, Thich Tinh Khiet.³⁰

Nhu seems at least to have been candid in his intransigence. Diem, by contrast, was certainly not when he told the departing Ambassador a few days later that he would take US advice and again declare his conciliatory intentions, even though, he implied, this would in effect repudiate Nhu's wife. But Vice President Tho had just made an uncompromising appearance at a press conference, and the Department now told the Embassy it was on the verge of publicly condemning Diem's intransigence on the Buddhist issue.³¹

Despite Diem's assurances to Ambassador Nolting, tension with the Buddhists intensified, and all talk of conciliation vanished when the government raided Buddhist pagodas in Saigon and other principal cities on 21 August. Hundreds of monks were arrested and some were injured. The authorship of the raids was unclear, at the time, with two Station officers on the scene at Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon reporting that the operation was commanded by Police Commissioner Tran Van Tu, "dressed in a Republican Youth uniform." The initial Embassy reporting, meanwhile, suggested that the impetus came from the military, which was thought to have encouraged Diem in his proclamation of martial law that took effect at midnight 20 August.³²

While seeking an appointment with Nhu, Richardson cabled an interpretation similar to the Embassy's, emphasizing growing ARVN impatience with the Buddhists as expressed by general officers including Nguyen Khanh and Ton That Dinh. Like Nolting, he could see no potential civilian replacement

³⁰ FVSA 16285, 6 August 1963,

³¹ Saigon Embassy Telegram 220, 13 August 1963, and State Department Telegram to Saigon, same date,

³² SAIG 0148, William Trueheart, Telegram to Department of State, 21 August 1963, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 595.

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for Diem. He doubted that the current situation implied a "witting or unwitting (sic) takeover of the state by the armed forces." Apparently seeing no likely effect of Buddhist unrest on Diem's authority, he recommended that the US continue to work for "some improved continuation of Diem's administration for at least 12 more months to allow for consolidation and further progress of military campaigns against the Viet Cong."³³ [redacted]

The pagoda raids took place during the introductory visit of the new US Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, to Admiral Harry Felt, commander of US Pacific forces, in Honolulu. During a discussion of the prospects in Saigon, departing Ambassador Nolting maintained his long-held position that the Diem regime was the best available, and that its overthrow would lead to Communist victory. William Colby, accompanying Felt as the CIA representative, no longer endorsed negotiation with Nhu, suggesting rather that recent gains by the Strategic Hamlet program would buy time for the US to "work through a Naguib first phase" in a new government while we waited for the emergence of a "Vietnamese Nasser."³⁴ [redacted]

Nhu received Richardson on the afternoon of 22 August. He was at pains to reinforce the impression of ARVN sponsorship of the Pagoda raids, emphasizing to the COS the generals' initiative in planning martial law. He was not even present, he said, when an ARVN delegation led by General Tran Van Don visited Diem on the 20th. Nhu understood that at that session Diem had urged restraint. Nhu denied any role in planning the pagoda raids, although he now endorsed them. Richardson was left with the impression that Nhu was not in fact an important participant; he seemed rather to be observing events from the sidelines.³⁵ [redacted]

A different picture emerged from the testimony of the Station's military contacts. The principal early witness was General Tran Van Don, who acknowledged on 23 August that he and several other generals, including Nguyen Khanh and "Big Minh," had planned and advocated martial law. But he denied any prior knowledge, let alone sponsorship, of the pagoda raids. He intimated to Lou Conein that the orders came from Nhu, and he denounced a Voice of America (VOA) broadcast which asserted that regular ARVN forces had attacked the pagodas. A similar version came from a high Palace official named Nguyen Dinh Thuan. He contacted Rufus Phillips, director of USOM's Rural Affairs Division and an acquaintance since Phillips' service in Vietnam

³³ SAIG 0208, 22 August 1963, [redacted]

³⁴ [redacted] ibid. [redacted]

³⁵ SAIG 0222, 22 August 1963, ibid. [redacted]

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as a CIA officer in the mid-1950s. He confirmed Don's account of the move against the Buddhists, saying that Nhu had tricked the Army when he used martial law to stage the pagoda raids.³⁶ []

The Station was as much in the dark as the dissident generals claimed to have been and got no advance warning of the raids. It learned only later that Nhu had used the faithful Colonel Tung and the opportunistic Ton That Dinh to run the operation. Smith remembered being astonished at the regime's apparent assumption that the US could tolerate such an assault on an important world religion. Despite the history of apparently genuine empathy between Nhu and Richardson, and their general agreement on war policy, the evidence of Nhu's responsibility for the pagoda raids outraged the COS.³⁷ []

A Conditional Repudiation of Ngo Dinh Diem []

Nhu's apparent perfidy generated an emotional reaction in Washington as well. The custodians of Vietnam policy on that August weekend—Hilsman, George Ball, and Averell Harriman at State, and Michael Forrestal at the White House—collaborated on a cable that included an ultimatum to Diem to dismiss Nhu, and notification to "key military leaders" of this demand. The generals could also be told that, failing Diem's compliance, the US would cease supporting him. If this resulted in the paralysis of central government, Washington would give the generals direct support. Reached at the family home in Hyannisport, President Kennedy approved this message, which went out late 24 August after notification to CIA and the Defense Department. A subsequent cable from Hilsman to Lodge, sent in Agency channels, referred to "agonizing at highest levels." Hilsman acknowledged that the "course outlined is dangerous but all agree that delaying [a] clearcut US stand is even more dangerous."³⁸ []

Knowing of the new State guidance, but not having seen its text, Colby cabled Richardson on the 25th that he understood implementation was subject to Lodge's judgment. In this context, he noted the danger of discarding a bird in the hand before knowing the "birds in bush, or songs they may sing." He exhorted the COS to find some way of keeping the initiative in American hands, perhaps by getting Diem to transfer working authority to ARVN and retire with the Nhus to Dalat. But Richardson should also look for someone to fill Diem's shoes, as the "trend of policy is toward emptying them." Colby

³⁶ SAIG 0265, 24 August 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, p. 611. []

³⁷ CSHP 57, pp. 16-17; Smith interview, 6 October 1992 []

³⁸ David Smith interview by Thomas L. Ahern, Silver Spring, MD, tape recording, 6 October 1992 [] 6 October 1992; Deptel 243, 24 August 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, p. 628 []

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wanted the Station's ideas on a "man, team, or false face behind which we can mobilize the necessary effort to continue the main war against the Viet Cong."³⁹ []

Both the Ambassador and Richardson objected to some of the terms of the new guidance. Using CIA communications, presumably for enhanced security, Lodge argued on 25 August that taking US demands to Diem would simply allow the President to temporize while Nhu took counteraction. He wanted to use CIA to take the American demands to the ARVN leadership and let the generals deal with Diem. Richardson agreed with Lodge about not going to Diem but had reservations about serving as messenger to the generals. For one thing, he worried about retaliation if the Station role were exposed. More basically, he doubted the wisdom of the entire enterprise. He replied to Colby, who was now urging him to take the initiative, by expressing doubt about the unity of ARVN leadership and concern about street fighting in Saigon that would endanger American lives. He dismissed Colby's suggestion that he get Diem to retire to Dalat, presciently contending that if the generals took over, "the Ngo family will be lucky to get out of the country alive."⁴⁰ []

Richardson followed with a detailed but inconclusive assessment of potential military and civilian alternatives to Diem. He said he could not discuss the mechanics of a coup against Diem without conferring with the generals, and suggested—apparently accepting Station involvement as inevitable—an initial approach in Pleiku to the II Corps commander, Brigadier General Nguyen Khanh. An important part of such an approach would be persuading the generals that they should maintain a "facade of legality and civilian rule" by installing Vice President Tho as President and at least temporarily retaining the constitution.⁴¹ []

Colby brusquely replied, still on 25 August, that Richardson would have to deal more forcefully with the generals than he was proposing to do. The "US must win this affair if it goes into it, and it has already decided to do just that. ... In this connection, we are confident you will keep [your] eye on this main ball rather than window dressing of civilian leadership." Colby was presumably aware, at this point, of State's acquiescence to Lodge in the matter of bypassing Diem in order to take the US demands directly to the generals.⁴² []

³⁹ DIR 63855, 25 August 1963, *ibid.* []

⁴⁰ SAIG 0292, 0293, and 0296, 25 August 1963, *ibid.* []

⁴¹ SAIG 0296. []

⁴² DIR 63869, 25 August 1963, [] *FRUS, 1961-63, III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, pp. 634-635.* []

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General Khanh was in Saigon on 25 August and sought out the [redacted] CIA liaison officer, Al Spera, to express his dismay, and that of other unnamed officers, with the recent course of events. He claimed to fear that the regime might cut a deal with North Vietnam rather than accept US pressure to accommodate the Buddhists. Khanh said that he and his friends would then rebel, and he pleaded for a statement of the US response to such a development. Spera asked if the generals had developed any concept of post-Diem political arrangements. Khanh responded that they were concerned solely to prevent a Viet Cong victory; "it was up to the United States to take care of the political part."⁴³ [redacted]

With Colby's guidance in hand, Richardson discussed the question of notifying the generals at a 26 August meeting with Lodge and other members of the Country Team. Washington had deferred this question to Lodge, and because he was concerned about keeping the official American hand from showing, he decided to use CIA as intermediary with the generals. After Richardson described the previous day's meeting with Khanh, and Khanh's statement that Brigadier General Khiem enjoyed his full confidence, Lodge approved an approach to these two by the relatively junior Station officers already dealing with them. The Country Team then turned to the substance of the new guidance. They condensed it into nine points whose key provisions were the need to remove the Nhus and a disclaimer of any US intention to participate in a coup. This was accompanied by a promise of "direct support [to the generals] during any interim period of breakdown" of the central government.⁴⁴ [redacted]

Spera flew to Pleiku the same day to brief General Khanh, and Conein approached General Khiem in Saigon. Khiem said he and the other generals welcomed and shared Washington's views. He "concurred in contact with General Khanh" but warned against briefing General Don on the ground that Nhu's people had infiltrated Don's staff. He asked Conein to stand by for a meeting with Major General Minh.⁴⁵ [redacted]

General Khanh's reaction was very different. He emphasized that the generals were not ready to act, since they intended to wait for evidence of an approach by Nhu to the DRV. When Spera emphasized that "Nhu must go,"

⁴³ SAIG 0291, 25 August 1963, [redacted]

⁴⁴ [redacted] SAIG 0304, 26 August 1963, and blind memorandum "Sequence of CAS Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963," 23 October 1963, all in *ibid.*, [redacted] John H. Richardson, Chief of Station, Saigon, Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, "Chronology of Events, Contacts and Discussions Relating to the Saigon Station Coup d'Etat Activities of August 1963," 28 September 1963, [redacted]

[redacted] hereafter cited as Richardson to McCone, "Chronology of Events, 28 September 1963"). [redacted]

⁴⁵ SAIG 0305, 26 August 1963, [redacted]

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Khanh nodded, but pointed out that "if Diem yields and fires Nhu" there would be no need to revolt. Khanh cautioned against any approach to the unpredictable General Dinh, and he looked "disturbed" that the Station had briefed General Khiem without his prior approval. He also noted that a coup might fail and asked for a US guarantee of asylum and material support for coup leaders and their families.⁴⁶ []

As the Station waited for the generals to act, Richardson was having to cope with Headquarters' anxiety over his dealings with the press. An article in *The New York Times* by David Halberstam had just described Richardson's meeting with Nhu on 22 August and the Station's relationship with Special Forces chief Colonel Tung. Headquarters wanted to identify the leak. Richardson replied that he had encountered Halberstam at the airport on the 22nd and that he acknowledged having just seen Nhu. He denied, however, that he had said anything more about the meeting than to speculate that Nhu had played a less central role in the pagoda raids than some people thought. The Country Team was discreet, he was sure, and the leak must have originated in Washington after his report reached Washington consumers. Alluding to Halberstam's allegation that top Mission officials had ignored warnings of a government move against the Buddhists, Richardson said he had been trying to ward off press charges of Agency involvement in the pagoda raids when he told Halberstam that they had taken him by surprise.⁴⁷ []

With respect to Tung, Richardson noted that several reporters had earlier visited [] and knew of Tung's role and that of the Vietnamese and US Special Forces. Apparently accepting these visits as unavoidable, []

[] and suggested that these largely accounted for press access to classified information on the paramilitary programs.⁴⁸ []

Second Thoughts []

By 26 August, two days after Washington's decision to force Nhu's departure, the rush of events unleashed by the new policy was beginning to escape its authors' control. Still using Agency communications, Ambassador Lodge complained to State that the Voice of America (VOA) was once again out of step when it announced that Washington might cut aid to Vietnam. In Lodge's view, the VOA had eliminated any chance of a surprise move by the generals.

⁴⁶ SAIG 0330, 26 August 1963, *ibid.*; Richardson to McCone, "Chronology of Events, 28 September 1963." []

⁴⁷ [] and SAIG 0325, 26 August 1963, both in []

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* []

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Secretary Rusk himself drafted the cable of embarrassed apology, but he had a more fundamental question to deal with in a meeting the same day with the President. Back in Washington from Hyannisport, Kennedy told the National Security Council that Diem and Nhu had accomplished a great deal, and the US Government should not let *The New York Times* pressure it into overthrowing the Diem regime. The President's doubts were echoed by Secretary McNamara and General Taylor, and the meeting eventually adjourned on an inconclusive note.⁴⁹ []

President Kennedy's discovery that some of his most senior advisors opposed a showdown with the Diem regime probably accounts for the sudden effort by its authors to share the responsibility for the weekend cable encouraging a confrontation. Both Hilsman and Harriman claimed that other agencies had "cleared" the new guidance, implying that consultation had taken place and their concurrence secured before the decision to transmit it to Lodge. But it was Harriman himself who, on the evening of 24 August, phoned Richard Helms, then Deputy Director for Plans, to describe the message and say that "he had wanted to inform the Agency about the dispatch of this telegram and that it would be going out shortly." Colby had been in regular consultation with State during the week preceding the cable, but no one there raised the subject with him.⁵⁰ []

Meanwhile, still on 26 August, a Colby cable to Richardson acknowledged Nhu's certain awareness that a coup might be in preparation and urged the Station to move quickly but carefully to energize military figures such as General Khanh. Colby urged Richardson to furnish order-of-battle information [] [] in time for the conference with the President set for the next day.⁵¹ []

Events in Saigon took an apparently decisive turn on 27 August when General Khiem identified for Conein the other principal coup planners, mostly

⁴⁹ *FRUS, 1961-63, III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, pp. 636-641. []

⁵⁰ At lunch with Harriman a month later, McCone wondered about the rush, on that August weekend, to reverse the US attitude toward Diem. "Harriman accepted no responsibility for the cable and asked why we did not express ourselves when it was 'coordinated.'" It had not been coordinated, said McCone; Helms had merely been informed of its general substance and told that the President, State, and Defense supported it. Harriman claimed to have been told that CIA had supported and coordinated the cable. McCone: "I corrected this impression." John A. McCone, Memorandum for the Record, "Discussion with Governor Averell Harriman at Lunch, October 30th," 30 October 1963; copy in History Staff files; *FRUS, 1961-63, III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, p. 675n; Richard Helms, DDP, Memorandum for the Record, "Phone Conversation with Governor Averell Harriman," 26 August 1963, and unsigned draft memorandum, "Vietnam Policy Decisions," 28 August 1963, both in [] *FRUS, 1961-63, III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, p. 628. References in the Helms memorandum establish the draft memorandum as having been written by Mr. Colby. []

⁵¹ [] []

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general officers but including Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho. There was no discussion of trying to get Diem to remove Nhu, and Khiem promised a coup d'état within one week. [REDACTED]

52 [REDACTED]

Khiem displayed some anxiety about the security of the generals' contact with the Americans. He was also uncertain about US intentions and the authority of Conein and Spera to convey those intentions. Accordingly, he proposed to use an intermediary for further contact with him; meanwhile, he said, General Minh's position precluded any contact with the Americans at this time. Khiem said that Minh wanted to confirm Washington's commitment to a showdown with Diem and would shortly have delivered to Conein's home a short text that he wanted broadcast over VOA as proof of US bona fides.⁵³ [REDACTED]

Later the same day, Colby summarized this meeting for President Kennedy and the National Security Council. The President wondered whether a coup was either desirable or feasible and found his doubts echoed by McNamara and Nolting. The discussion centered on Ngo Dinh Nhu. Nolting reflected the policy dilemma when he argued the impossibility of separating Diem and Nhu. Then, apparently not seeing the contradiction, he urged that Diem be persuaded to send Nhu abroad as the only way for Washington to avoid supporting a coup. Nolting observed that CIA had already given the generals US endorsement of a coup, but Kennedy thought there was still time to draw back. The President ended the session by "repeating Ambassador Nolting's view that the generals interested in the coup were not good enough to bring it about."⁵⁴ [REDACTED]

Despite these second thoughts, neither Kennedy nor any of his advisors withdrew the State guidance of 24 August. Instead, a temporizing cable asked Lodge to assess both the coup participants whom Khiem had named to Conein and the balance of coup and countercoup forces. It gave Ambassador Lodge an opportunity to back away from confrontation, telling him that "highest authority" wanted to know if he and General Harkins presently favored the generals' plan.⁵⁵ [REDACTED]

The next day, 28 August, both Lodge and Richardson confirmed their commitment to the removal of Ngo Dinh Nhu, even at the price of overthrowing

⁵² SAIG 0346, 27 August 1963, *ibid.* [REDACTED]

⁵³ This was overtaken by events when Lodge later personally vouched for Conein and Spera in an encounter with one of the generals. Smith interview, 6 October 1992; SAIG 0346, 27 August 1963 [REDACTED]

⁵⁴ *FRUS, 1961-63, III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, pp. 659-665. [REDACTED]

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 667-668. [REDACTED]

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Diem. In a cable to Washington, Lodge asserted his support for a coup, and claimed that Harkins endorsed it, too. He ended his message by quoting that morning's emotional appeal from Vice President Tho for unspecified US action to prevent catastrophe. Richardson's cable was couched in even more urgent terms, saying that things had reached the point of no return. Saigon was an armed camp, and the Ngo family appeared to have dug in for a "last ditch battle." But Conein's meeting with Khiem had persuaded Richardson of the generals' unity of purpose. "If the Ngo family wins now, they and Vietnam will stagger on to final defeat at the hands of their own people and the Viet Cong." Accordingly, Richardson proposed to have a Station officer "explore possibilities of our assistance" with General Khiem's intermediary.⁵⁶ []

Colby picked up the "point of no return" theme at that day's first National Security Council meeting. Critics of the Saigon regime agreed that a coup must be staged and must be successful. A reluctant Secretary McNamara thought the events of the last day had "almost pulled us along" and cautioned against proceeding "as if we were being pushed." President Kennedy rejected the view that it was too late to draw back, to which McGeorge Bundy responded that every action in support of the generals reduced our freedom of action. The second NSC session, early that evening, was equally inconclusive. Kennedy was now aware of General Harkins' lack of enthusiasm for US backing of a coup and directed that he and Lodge be given another chance to back off. They should be enjoined against endorsing any action against the regime merely because of a perception that Washington favored it.⁵⁷ []

In Saigon, General Minh reversed himself in the matter of contact with the Americans and through General Khiem set up a meeting for the morning of 29 August. Preparing to leave for Khiem's office, Conein and Spera got word that COS Richardson wanted them. The problem was a message from Taylor to Harkins asking him for his personal assessment of prospects for a successful coup. Richardson had just seen this cable, in which Taylor said that the State guidance of 24 August had been prepared without military participation, and added that "authorities are now having second thoughts."⁵⁸ []

Faced with a possible change of heart in Washington, Richardson decided to let Conein and Spera go on to their meeting, but he instructed them in emphatic terms to make no commitments. At Khiem's office, things got under way in reciprocally wary fashion. Refusing to discuss the state of their planning, the generals repeatedly alluded to "steadfast" US support of Ngo Dinh

⁵⁶ Embassy Saigon 364, 28 August 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, pp. 668-671; SAIG 0363, 28 August 1963, []

⁵⁷ *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-September 1963*, pp. 1-6, 12-14, []

⁵⁸ SAIG 0383, 28 August 1963, [] Taylor's cable is JCS 3368-63, 28 August 1963, Department of State, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, pp. 12-14, []

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Nhu and the Vietnamese Special Forces, his "Can Lao army." Conein and Spera at first thought they might be caught in a government provocation, but eventually concluded that the generals genuinely feared an American trap on the government's behalf. Finally getting down to business, Minh called for the suspension of economic aid as a sign of US intentions and to "force Nhu to show his hand." But on the subject of a post-Diem political structure, Minh and Khiem offered as little as Khanh had a few days earlier: they wanted the "US to think what type political leadership should follow" the overthrow of the family.⁵⁹

An Aborted Coup d'Etat

Returning to the Embassy, Conein and Spera accompanied Richardson to the Ambassador's office, where they began briefing Deputy Chief of Mission William Trueheart. Lodge came in and asked about the meeting's results. Nothing definitive, Conein replied, because of the restrictions resulting from the "second thoughts" cable. Lodge demanded to know what that was and, on being told, exploded in anger at Richardson. He accused the COS of having "destroyed" any chance to effect a coup, to which Richardson entered a firm dissent. He reminded the COS that he worked for the Ambassador, and the Ambassador only.⁶⁰

Frustrated by what he interpreted as Station obstructionism, Lodge got another chance later the same day to encourage the generals. Within hours of the Spera-Conein meeting with Minh and Khiem, two other oppositionists, Dai Viet politician Bui Diem and Brigadier General Le Van Kim, described the session to USOM official Rufus Phillips. It seemed the generals were still nervous, and Kim wanted his trusted friend Phillips to get confirmation from Lodge that Spera and Conein were speaking for the Ambassador. Phillips returned that evening with an affirmative reply from Lodge, whereupon Kim said that Conein should see General Khiem the next day to discuss the mechanics of the operation and its support by the US. Lodge promptly authorized this contact, telling the Station it could "volunteer" to help the generals with tactical planning.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Lucien Conein interview by Thomas L. Ahern, McLean, VA, tape recording, 19 February 1992; SAIG 0406, 29 August 1963.

⁶⁰ Conein came to believe that this incident triggered Lodge's subsequent demand for Richardson's recall, described in the next chapter. As Conein saw it, wounded vanity prevented Lodge from seeing that he had reason to be grateful to Richardson for avoiding premature action. Conein thought Lodge was reacting to Washington's failure to advise him of its "second thoughts," and that Lodge was also irritated because he had sent Conein and Spera out to see that a coup took place, and they had supposedly failed him. Conein interview, 19 February 1992; Richardson to McCone, "Chronology of Events, 28 September 1963"; Enno H. Knoche memorandum for the record, "Meeting in the DCI's Office...7 October 1963."

⁶¹ Richardson to McCone, "Chronology of Events, 28 September 1963."

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At the same time, Lodge moved to bring Washington into line with his determination to instigate a coup d'état. Early in the evening of 29 August, he sent a cable which began, "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government." American prestige, already committed, and the impossibility of winning with Ngo Dinh Diem, required an "all-out effort" to get the generals to move without delay. Lodge asked for a Presidential order authorizing General Harkins to repeat to the generals what they had already heard from Spera and Concin, and for authority for himself to announce the suspension of US aid if this were demanded by the generals. Lodge acknowledged that Harkins still wanted an appeal to Diem to get rid of Nhu, but rejected this as futile.⁶² []

On the evening of an already full day, [] in Saigon advised the Station of a report that Nhu was about to arrest the generals he suspected of planning a coup. This generated a frantic search for the most secure way to warn the generals. The Station first decided to use a MAAG officer to pass the word through his next door neighbor, an ARVN major serving as administrative assistant to "Big Minh." There was no one home, and the MAAG officer volunteered to alert another acquaintance, Rufus Phillips' friend General Le Van Kim. The contact succeeded, this time, and Kim promised to alert Minh. The Palace made no move against the generals, but Richardson, saying he hoped that Headquarters would not interpret his concern as reflecting a "negative Station attitude," worried that Nhu might just be biding his time.⁶³ []

While all this was going on, Lodge's cable reached Washington in time for consideration at an NSC meeting chaired by the President at noon, Washington time, on 29 August. Reserving the right to pull back at any time, Kennedy approved both of Lodge's requests. State's message to Lodge thus included instructions for Harkins in his proposed new role as participant in coup preparations. The only hesitation appeared in a cable from Rusk that noted Lodge's treatment of Diem and Nhu "as a single package" and resurrected the perennial hope—this time, by the threatened withdrawal of US support—that Diem might be induced to remove his brother. But Rusk put this as a suggestion, not an order, and ended by speculating that any move to separate the Ngo brothers was perhaps best left to the generals.⁶⁴ []

⁶² Embassy Saigon 375, 29 August 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 20-22. []

⁶³ SAIG 0445, 30 August 1963, []

⁶⁴ *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 26-36. []

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Armed with the President's approval, Ambassador Lodge met on 30 August with the Station and General Harkins to orchestrate the next move. He had previously noted that, once Harkins became directly involved in planning, the US "might well have reached a point of no return." Richardson now felt constrained to give his judgment that the generals had no plan and were not ready to act. Lodge nevertheless "instructed Harkins to continue coup discussions with General Khiem." Wanting Harkins to understand the atmosphere at Joint General Staff (JGS) Headquarters, Richardson sent him an intelligence report that described—accurately, the COS thought—the backing and filling that still characterized the generals' efforts to mobilize for a coup.⁶⁵ []

Ignoring Richardson's doubts, Lodge was now ready to increase the pressure on the generals to move against Diem. But events conspired to frustrate him. First Khiem signaled through his aide that he was "too busy" to meet that day, 30 August. Lodge then instructed Harkins to see Khiem, but that overture was fended off as well. Meanwhile, the Station was dealing with Headquarters' anxiety about operational security. After conferring with Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) Trueheart, the Station rejected as impracticable a suggestion []

On the evening of the 30th, Nhu convened the generals at JGS Headquarters near the airport. In a review of the confrontation with the US, he demonstrated how little he understood his American counterparts. Ignoring Richardson's longtime support of the regime and its programs, Nhu asserted that "CIA people do their utmost to alienate people" from the government. He was probably right in accusing local American officials of feeding the US press information unflattering to the regime, but Nhu had clearly been victimized by the Ambassador's capacity for dissimulation when he said of Lodge that "we manage him—he will fully agree with our concepts and actions."⁶⁷ []

When General Harkins finally got an appointment with General Khiem, on the morning of 31 August, the results were anticlimactic. Khiem said that the generals lacked access to sufficient forces in and around Saigon, and simply "did not feel ready." Apparently despairing of any immediate prospect of removing Ngo Dinh Nhu, the generals were now thinking of a compromise in

⁶⁵ Richardson to McCone, "Chronology of Events, 28 September 1963." []

⁶⁶ Ibid.; SAIG 0484, 30 August 1963, []

⁶⁷ SAIG 0499, 31 August 1963, [] Richardson to McCone, "Chronology of Events, 28 September 1963." [] Harkins's on-the-spot decision not to reassure Khiem of US support for a coup created some controversy in Washington, as there was disagreement not only about Harkins's judgment but also as to whether he had been instructed or merely authorized to assure Khiem of US support. Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, "Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, August 31, 1963, 11 a.m.," 31 August 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 70-71. []

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which some of them would take positions in a Cabinet headed by Nhu in a prime ministerial role. In this atmosphere, Harkins decided not to affirm US support for a coup.⁶⁸

On the same day, Le Van Kim told Phillips that Nhu was clearly aware of the plotting, which would have to become more tightly compartmented. During this session, Phillips received another indication of the poor coordination that plagued the conspiracy throughout. He mentioned the Khiem-Harkins meeting and discovered that Kim knew nothing of it. Phillips then took it upon himself to paraphrase Khiem's remarks about working with Nhu, to which Kim "reacted violently," repudiating Khiem as a spokesman for the other generals.⁶⁹

Kim suggested that the Ambassador meet General Minh, an idea vetoed without explanation on Lodge's behalf by his military assistant, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Dunn. Returning to Kim with this message, Phillips learned that Minh had also been unaware of the Harkins-Khiem meeting. Kim purported to speak for Minh in saying that Nhu was absolutely unacceptable. He said that coup planning would continue despite Nhu's Special Forces having been put on full alert and despite US failure to make any overt move against Nhu. Kim apparently spoke for himself in questioning Khiem's authority as a spokesman.⁷⁰

Richardson cabled Helms that "this particular coup is finished," and turned to an assessment of damage to the Station's security, and possible effects on the liaison programs resulting from Station participation in the conspiracy. He saw no choice but to try to continue working with the regime: "We did our best and got licked." But while a particular coup might have failed, the dominant perception among US officials of a terminally ailing regime in Saigon continued to guide policy deliberations.⁷¹

⁶⁸ SAIG 0499, 31 August 1963,

⁶⁹ Richardson to McCone, "Chronology of Events, 28 September 1963."

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ SAIG 0499

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CHAPTER 13

Passive Engagement

Ambassador Lodge endorsed, at least for the record, Harkins' abstention at the meeting with General Minh from conveying US support and encouragement of a coup. Lodge's subsequent instructions to the Station prohibited active encouragement of further planning: the Station was to listen to the generals without displaying more than "an open-minded or sympathetic interest." In Washington, a National Security Council meeting took place on the same day as Harkins' meeting with Khiem. Paul Kattenburg, a State Department expert on Vietnam who had just returned from a visit to Saigon, argued on behalf of Lodge and Truchart that any compromise with the regime would put the US so at odds with a disaffected population as to ensure that it would be "butted out of the country within six months to a year."¹

The *Pentagon Papers* historian concluded that a "rambling inability to focus the problem" marred the deliberations at this meeting, but noted that it was the first recorded instance of someone following "to its logical conclusion the negative analysis of the situation—i.e., that the war could not be won with the Diem regime, yet its removal would leave such political instability as to foreclose success."²

On 2 September, Nhu's English-language mouthpiece, the *Times of Vietnam*, sported the banner headline "CIA Financing Planned Coup d'Etat." An alarmed Station proposed to suspend the funding of all joint operations "including NVN and Laos ops from which we expect only modest results anyway." But in a meeting with Lodge that day, Nhu maintained a conciliatory tone while giving implausible assurances that the Buddhists would be appeased and he himself would leave the government, if only after the departure of "certain US agents." Nhu claimed to have rejected that very day, citing

¹ Senator Mike Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), II, p. 241. Richardson memo to McCone, "Chronology of Events," 28 September 1963 *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 73.

² Gravel, *Pentagon Papers*, II, p. 241.

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his "loyalty to the Americans," an offer from the Polish member of the International Control Commission (ICC) to serve as an intermediary between Nhu and DRV Prime Minister Pham Van Dong.³ []

Washington reacted skeptically. Lodge quickly declared that he had not really taken Nhu seriously, and that he was about to dispatch John Richardson to tell Nhu that his promises did not meet American requirements. Richardson did in fact visit the Palace, on 6 September, but his report contains no mention of any demands on the Vietnamese. Instead, Richardson listened to Nhu deny again any role in the pagoda raids and any prior knowledge of the *Times of Vietnam* attack on CIA. Alluding to the American editor of his paper, the wife of a former USIS officer, Nhu said he would never "hide behind backsides of a woman...referring specifically to Mrs. Gregory." Nhu devoted some time to the effect of Palace life on his children, worrying that their isolation might create lasting psychological wounds; this left Richardson with the impression that he might be setting the stage for a "temporary withdrawal." But the COS noted that other reporting contradicted some of Nhu's assertions. He calmly accepted the possibility that Nhu was dissimulating, explaining to Headquarters that "this would not be unnatural in power and politics."⁴ []

Just the day before, [] had reported to Richardson a bizarre conversation with Tran Van Khiem, Madame Nhu's younger brother. Khiem had displayed a list of Americans he intended to assassinate; John Richardson was first on the list, which also included Lou Conein. Now, Khiem telephoned, interrupting Richardson's reporting of the meeting with Nhu. Khiem asked if the COS had heard rumors about assassination squads, and being told yes, invited him for a drink. During their hour and a half together, Khiem denied everything, trying to portray Richardson and himself as victims of the "endless Saigon rumor mill." The COS dispassionately told Headquarters that Khiem was probably just another manipulator, "like everybody else."⁵ []

In the midst of all this dissimulation, Lou Conein's wide range of contacts made him witness to two revealing events. The first of these exposed the instability of one of the key figures in the conspiracy. The other presaged Ambassador Lodge's subsequent dismissal of John Richardson. []

³ Henry Cabot Lodge, Telegram to the Department of State, 2 September 1963, FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963, pp. 84-85. []

⁴ Ibid., pp. 104-110; SAIG 0698, 6 September 1963, []

⁵ [] SAIG 0700, 6 September 1963, []

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On 4 September, Conein was summoned by Brigadier General Ton That Dinh, Military Governor of Saigon under martial law, whose direct command of troops in the capital area made him indispensable to the success of a coup. Conein found him in an "exultant, ranting, raving mood," flanked by bodyguards whose submachine guns pointed at Conein even during the luncheon phase of the four-hour session. Dinh described himself as the man of the hour who would save Vietnam from Communism and who could kill or kidnap anyone in Saigon, including—should there be a move to accommodate the Communists—Dinh himself. Dinh violently accused John Mecklin, USIS chief in Saigon, of being a Communist, and rushed around the room, gesticulating wildly at maps on the wall and insisting that the city was surrounded by Communists.⁶

Dinh's behavior grew more aggressively erratic, as he first demanded to know whether Conein had been plotting against him, then suddenly grabbed the telephone, called Mrs. Conein, and complimented her on her opportunity to converse with the military governor of Saigon. Dropping the phone, he ordered an aide to rush flowers to the Conein home. Another mood swing followed, with Dinh reproaching Conein for not having made contact since Dinh's elevation to his current post. Conein said he had tried, only to be told by an aide that Dinh was busy. Dinh forthwith summoned the aide, reviled him for his dereliction, and for emphasis spat at the officer's feet. Conein, who had known Dinh for years, described his personality as totally changed and the four-hour harangue as even more disjointed and incoherent than might appear from his report. He thought Dinh might need little if any provocation to try to seize power in South Vietnam.⁷

Reprisal Against Richardson

This episode was followed by a social gathering at Conein's home that provided the first indication of Lodge's intent to punish John Richardson for his perceived obstruction of a coup. Conein was almost as well connected with the press as with the Vietnamese military, and on 6 September he hosted a dinner attended by several foreign correspondents, including Joseph Alsop. Also present was Lodge aide Lieutenant Colonel Michael Dunn, who during the course of the evening announced that Lodge had "chewed out" John Richardson for "disobeying orders" and would soon have him replaced. As Conein later recalled it, Richardson was not the only one about to leave; Dunn also named General Harkins and one or two others as on their way out.⁸

⁶ SAIG 0618, 4 September 1963,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John H. Richardson, Memorandum for the Record, "Conversation with Mr. Frank Wisner, 14 October 1963," SAIG 1434, 5 October 1963, Conein interview, 19 February 1992.

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A week later, Alsop (staying in Saigon as the Ambassador's house guest) invited Richardson to lunch, during which he pronounced Diem and Nhu insane. Richardson tried to moderate this view, but later judged the effort as "in no way successful." On the same day, 13 September, Lodge wrote to Rusk asking him to get the President to approve dispatching Major General Edward Lansdale "to take charge, under my supervision, of all US relationships with a change of government here." Lansdale would need a staff, he added, and should replace Richardson as chief of the CIA Station.⁹ []

DCI John McCone discussed the matter with the President and the NSC's Executive Committee on 17 September, where a consensus emerged that Lodge's demand for a new COS should be honored. But McCone drew the line at Lansdale, and McGeorge Bundy acknowledged CIA's "unalterable opposition." McCone argued that it was not merely Agency experience with Lansdale that made him unacceptable; rather, Lansdale's close association with Diem would make his return to Saigon positively detrimental to US interests unless the object were to seek an understanding with Diem and Nhu using Lansdale as a "friend in court." Inasmuch as at the same meeting the President authorized increasing Lodge's authority to give him more "leverage" over the Palace, no one defended using Lansdale in this way, and the proposal died.¹⁰ []

If Lodge could not have Lansdale, he could and did contest the Station's access to the Ngo brothers. Ostensibly skeptical of Richardson's responsiveness to policy guidance, but probably more concerned to defy McCone, he explicitly prohibited further meetings between the COS and Ngo Dinh Nhu. McCone responded by telling McGeorge Bundy that he proposed a total restructuring of the Saigon Station. He would send a new staff, under orders to preserve its anonymity, and in so doing maintain discreet contact with the Ngo brothers.¹¹ []

Bundy correctly saw this ploy as aimed at Lodge, and defended the Ambassador's right to determine whom the Mission—including the Station—would or would not see. Meanwhile, Richardson's support at Headquarters was surely not enhanced by stories in the American press on CIA operations in Vietnam. On 16 September, Richardson responded to a Headquarters call for

⁹ SAIG 0884, 13 September 1963, [] letter from Lodge to Rusk, *FRUS 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 205. []

¹⁰ John A. McCone, Memorandum for the Record, "Discussion-Secretary Rusk's conference room-Tuesday evening-6:00 p.m.-16 September 1963" 18 September 1963, []

¹¹ Walter Elder, "John A. McCone as Director of Central Intelligence," revised 1973 version, History Staff Job 8701032R, Box 4, pp. 276-277 (quoted in Mary S. McAuliffe, "John A. McCone as Director of Central Intelligence, 1961-1965," draft manuscript, History Staff, 1994). []

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better security, apologizing for what he implicitly acknowledged were leaks from inside the Station to David Halberstam and UPI's Neil Sheehan. Three days later, McCone wrote to Lodge, repeating his objection to Lansdale, but agreeing, if Lodge insisted, to find a replacement for Richardson.¹² []

Backing and Filling []

Meanwhile, amid these distractions, the Station tried to follow developments on the Vietnamese side. General Khiem reported to Al Spera about increased concern that Nhu might negotiate with the North, and about the generals' demands for positions in the Cabinet. He also recounted a claim by the mercurial General Dinh that Dinh had reported to Nhu an offer of 20 million piasters by an American official to overthrow Diem. This sort of backbiting and miscommunication seems to have characterized the entire enterprise on the Vietnamese side. General Tran Van Don, one of the plotters and an important Concin informant, later disparaged Khiem and Khanh, who were at first treated by the Station as the key conspirators: Khiem was "flighty" and unreliable, while Khanh was "the complete opportunist...and highly deceitful." Dinh, on the other hand, was one of the rebel group's "stalwarts." As the planning proceeded, Concin was continually startled by the conspirators' ignorance of each other's activity.¹³ []

As September wore on, some US officials came to share General Khiem's anxiety that Ngo Dinh Nhu might make some kind of accommodation with the North. Probably seeking to intimidate his American critics, Nhu did speculate on that topic in an interview with the ubiquitous Joseph Alsop. The French also acknowledged talking with Nhu about it. It was widely believed that Southern gains against the Viet Cong could make a negotiated settlement attractive to Hanoi. At this point, many US officials in both Washington and Saigon, taking at face value inflated Vietnamese statistics, saw continued progress in the war in the countryside.¹⁴ []

John Richardson was one of these. Having dutifully responded to Colby's enthusiasm for a coup d'état during the last week in August, he wrote in mid-September that the "shooting war was still going ahead well," and that the

¹² SAIG 0916, 16 September 1963, [] McCone memo to Lodge, 19 September 1963, pp. 1-3, [] Elder, "McCone," McAuliffe, ed., p. 277, []

¹³ SAIG 0940, 17 September 1963, [] Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), pp. 93-95; Concin interview, 19 February 1992, []

¹⁴ *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 295, 326, []

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political crisis was affecting it less than might have been expected. This message apparently helped consolidate an impression in Washington, at least at the working level, that Richardson uncritically shared General Harkins' perception of continuing military progress. When President Kennedy ordered Defense Secretary McNamara and JCS Chairman Taylor to Saigon on 23 September for another attempt to determine Diem's prospects, someone in McNamara's office advised CIA that Lansdale had urged the Secretary to see village defense leader Father Hoa in Camau, plus Secretary of State Nguyen Dinh Thuan and Vice President Tho. The purpose would be "to find out what is really going on, probably at variance with what Jocko [Richardson] and Harkins have been reporting."¹⁵

Headquarters' main concern at this point was not, however, the balance of forces in the countryside but the Station's relationship with the Ambassador. Guidance to the Station reflected the administration's decision to beef up the Ambassador's leverage with the Saigon government. On 19 September, Headquarters authorized the Station, subject to Lodge's wishes, to continue funding those activities "directly and substantially contributing to the war effort" and to "withhold payments for any units or activities engaged in repressive activities or otherwise politically sensitive"; this explicitly included those of the so-called civilian airborne rangers based in Saigon.¹⁶

The disillusionment produced by the collapse of the August coup persisted, as DCM Trueheart told Richardson that Washington wanted to be sure the Mission did not find itself "inadvertently involved in sparking or cranking up a coup." Richardson pointed out in this context that the "nine points" endorsing and even encouraging a coup that his men had conveyed to the generals in late August had never been rescinded; for all the COS knew, the conspirators still thought they had US support.¹⁷

Whether for its own purposes or in response to American pressure to remove the Nhus, the Palace now announced that Madame Nhu would travel to Europe and the United States. Assuming that she would look up her old friends the Harwoods in Paris, Headquarters asked them to try persuading her to tone down her advocacy of the regime and to postpone her visit to the US. Instead, in her customarily willful way, she commandeered the Harwoods to

¹⁵ SAIG 0998, 18 September 1963; undated informal memorandum from the Office of the Secretary of Defense to C/FE, Attention Mr. Gregg/Mr. Potter; both in The note, signed by "Frank," was probably written just before McNamara's departure for Vietnam on 23 September 1963.

¹⁶ 19 September 1963, *ibid.*, Box 1.

¹⁷ Richardson memorandum to McCone, "Chronology of Events," 28 September 1963.

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help her edit a letter to Vice President Johnson appealing for continued US support. She seemed not to recognize that Paul Harwood would have to report the incident to Headquarters.¹⁸ []

As McNamara and Taylor prepared to leave for Saigon, Headquarters instructed the Station to maintain its objectivity, and to abstain from advocating any particular solution. There must have been continuing controversy in Washington over the US Mission's conduct during the failed coup of late August, as this message was preceded by a curt requirement from McCone for a "buttoned down, unequivocal, and indisputable timetable of the events and discussion with Trueheart and the Ambassador." Colby, whom McCone was sending with the ExComm party, would handcarry the reply to Washington.¹⁹ []

Colby hoped to see a wide range of Vietnamese, in the Palace and among the generals, in addition to various agents and Station liaison contacts. His purposes were imprecise: "to exert influence, make possible openings, or give some assurances for future action, both on the Diem-Nhu side and among certain figures who might serve as alternatives." Lodge had already suspended Station contacts with Nhu, and he now vetoed this proposal; Colby would have no contacts with Vietnamese.²⁰ []

The Station did, however, make one working-level contact with the conspirators during the course of the Taylor-McNamara visit. Acting on General Minh's instructions to keep open the conspirators' communications with the Americans, Khiem invited Al Spera to see him on 26 September. He talked about growing VC strength around Saigon as an incentive for Diem to give the generals more authority to cope with the threat; he purported to think that Diem might now be ready to restrict the role of Ngo Dinh Nhu. The Station said rather bleakly, "we do not share Khiem's belief" that Diem would curb Nhu. Indeed, if Diem took seriously the work of his own intelligence organs, he had other things to worry about on a day when the chief of his Special Police was reporting that the US had targeted Diem for assassination: "An assistant to the chief of the American CIA and about fifty sabotage and assassination experts had been in Saigon for over three months."²¹ []

¹⁸ [] Harwood interview, 16 May 1990. []

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²⁰ [] and SAIG 1290, 28 September 1963, both in *ibid.* []

²¹ SAIG 1222, 26 September 1963; "Sequence of CAS Contacts," 23 October 1963; both in *ibid.*; []

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The Resumption of Active Conspiracy

An accidental meeting between Conein and General Tran Van Don at the Saigon airport on 2 October sparked the resumption of an active Station role in preparations for a coup. Don asked Conein to come see him in Nha Trang, and after checking with the Station and DCM Trueheart, Conein flew there the same day. Upon his arrival, Don announced that the generals now had a plan for the overthrow of Diem which General Minh wanted to discuss with Conein. Lodge later agreed to this, but required Conein, if asked whether the "nine points" were still valid, to say he did not know.²²

Conein saw Minh alone in Saigon for a little over an hour on 5 October. Asking, in effect, about those nine points, Minh said that he must know the US position on a change of government. He explicitly repudiated the notion that the war effort could be separated from the performance of the government, saying that popular alienation from the Diem regime was leading toward a Viet Cong victory. Minh identified some of the other coup planners, mentioning Khiem but not Khanh, and said neither he nor any of the others—here he made a joking exception of Ton That Dinh—had any political ambition.²³

The conspirators did not expect any American action to support a coup, Minh told Conein, but they needed assurances that the US would also not move to thwart them. Finally, Minh wanted a promise of continued economic and military aid at the existing level, which he put at \$1.5 million per day. Conein was noncommittal, promising only to convey Minh's requests to his superiors, and Minh proceeded to outline three approaches to removing the Ngo family. One—"the easiest"—called for assassinating Ngo Dinh Nhu and Ngo Dinh Can while keeping Diem in office. The others involved military action, or the threat of action, against the 5,500 troops in Saigon that Minh thought loyal to the Palace. Again, Conein made no comment, and Minh went on to voice his concerns about Khiem's loyalty and the danger of a "catastrophe" if regimental officers attempted an unsuccessful coup. Minh ended the meeting with assurances that he understood Conein's present inability to commit himself and said he would be back in touch.²⁴

With these two meetings, Lou Conein became the exclusive channel of communication between the US Government and the rebellious generals, who made it clear that he was their interlocutor of choice. Perhaps they wanted to improve security by reducing the contact points. Or they may have had doubts

²² SAIG 1385, printed in *FRUS 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 354-355
SAIG 1389, 4 October 1963, and "Sequence of CAS Contacts," both in
 Conein interview, 19 February 1992.

²³ SAIG 1445, 5 October 1963.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

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about Spera, after his uncoordinated approach to Tran Thien Khiem in late August. But Conein would in any case have been a natural for the role, as he had known some of the generals since 1945, when he joined the OSS team in Hanoi after the Japanese surrender.²⁵

Conein had been born and raised in France and served briefly in the Foreign Legion. Early in World War II, he moved to the US where he joined the US Army and was assigned to the OSS in 1943. When the OSS wanted to set up in Hanoi, Conein's native proficiency in French got him named to the team. The young lieutenant made friends among the junior Vietnamese officers serving the French; one of these was Tran Van Don, who became his principal contact during the conspiracy to unseat Ngo Diem.²⁶ In 1954, he returned as a member of Edward Lansdale's Saigon Military Station, and began a third tour in Vietnam when DDP Richard Bissell sent him back in 1961 to reactivate his military contacts.²⁷

More action-oriented than reflective, Conein would not have been the Station's first choice to represent the US Government in negotiating something as important as bringing down the government of an allied country. But the generals had been explicit about their preference, and the Station proceeded to do what it could to prevent misunderstandings. Given the ambiguous attitude of both sides, after the debacle of late August, this required meticulous supervision of the Conein channel, and Richardson charged DCOS Dave Smith with keeping things on track. The DCOS began by briefing Conein before each contact and then took his reports. Concerned that conviviality with old friends might interfere with accurate communication, Smith also instructed Conein to go on the wagon for the duration of the crisis.²⁸

The Departure of John Richardson

While Conein was seeing "Big Minh" on 5 October, John Richardson was leaving Saigon, ostensibly for consultations in Washington. But Lodge had exercised his prerogative, and a successor was on the way. Two days earlier, the COS had delivered an acerbic cable from McCone to Lodge. It summarized a Richard Starnes article in the *Washington Daily News* which claimed

²⁵ Smith interview, 6 October 1992; Lucien Conein, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, tape recording, McLean, VA, 24 June 1992 (hereafter cited as Conein interview, 24 June 1992).

²⁶ While in Hanoi, Conein met Vo Nguyen Giap and Ho Chi Minh. Giap once treated him to a five-hour disquisition on the theory and practice of revolution. Ho was at the time concentrating on winning the Americans away from their support of the French. In these efforts, he emanated an aura of sincerity and personal commitment that even the rough-spoken and somewhat cynical Conein found "mesmerizing." Conein interview, 24 June 1992.

²⁷ Conein interview, 24 June 1992.

²⁸ Smith interview, 6 October 1992.

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that an "arrogant CIA" in Vietnam had defied Lodge, causing a "dramatic confrontation" between Richardson and the Ambassador. Attributing his information to a "very high American official here... who has spent much of his life in the service of democracy," Starnes described the Station as "totally unaccountable" and claimed that local State and military officials were complaining of CIA involvement in policymaking and its dabbling in military operations. Choosing to ignore the correspondence on the subject in September, McCone said, "It is my understanding from McNamara [who had just returned from Saigon] that a change in our Chief of Station is advisable and if you feel this way I would appreciate your advising me promptly of your wishes and the reasons for them. I have great confidence in Richardson."²⁹ []

McCone went on to point out that Lodge's recent correspondence shared Richardson's cautious attitude toward a coup. He asked what the Ambassador thought of the "incredible charges... attributed to 'every State Department aide,'" especially since there had been no hint of these from the "dozen or so missions that have visited Saigon during my two years in office, including my own trip in June of last year." Discussing McCone's message with the COS, Lodge said that he accepted the falsity of all Starnes' charges and assured Richardson of his personal and professional esteem. He acknowledged their differences of opinion but said he wanted no yes-men around him. Nevertheless, he continued, he had heard increasing criticism of the Agency from the US military and thought that Richardson's liaison with the maligned Ngo Dinh Nhu had created "atmospheric disadvantages." He implied that the COS had burned out in a demanding job and made it clear that he wanted a change. But he also exploited the liaison with Nhu one last time when he instructed the COS to see Nhu with a message sent by Hilsman in CIA channels.³⁰ []

Richardson apparently accepted Lodge's assurances of good faith, telling Headquarters he had no idea where Starnes obtained his material. To McCone, the Starnes article and other bad press in Vietnam and the US looked like an orchestrated campaign against the Agency. He told Richardson to expect a cable from Counterintelligence Staff Chief James Angleton asking for "specific information he wishes from you bearing upon Soviet foreign intelligence services' continuing efforts to destroy CIA, as he believes many reporters and the *Times of Vietnam* are either witting or unwitting accomplices in this effort."³¹ []

²⁹ []

³⁰ SAIG 1378, 3 October 1963, and SAIG 1397, 4 October 1963, both *ibid.* Hilsman's message has not been found. []

³¹ SAIG 1397, and [] 3 October 1963, *ibid.* []

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In fact, and regardless of any Soviet agents in the American or Vietnamese press, the affair clearly originated in the Embassy. In late October, CIA Executive Director Lyman Kirkpatrick interviewed Kenneth Hansen, a Bureau of the Budget official who had been in Saigon at the time of Richardson's departure. Hansen had seen the Starnes article there and said that "it was an accurate reflection of what was being said in Saigon at the time and what Lodge had said to him" at their first meeting. Lodge, who Hansen understood had not yet found time for a briefing on Station programs, asserted that Richardson was "improperly dealing with Nhu who was the opposition." Lodge said that the COS was resisting the turnover to MACV of his paramilitary operations, and that the Station "acted on its own initiative without coordination and without any control from either the Ambassador or Washington."³²

Whether Lodge's complaints caused or merely reflected "what was being said in Saigon at the time" remains unclear. As we have seen, his aide, Dunn, was already quoting him to the press in early September. But the Hansen interview established that Lodge's comportment encouraged the campaign against Richardson and the Agency, whether or not the Ambassador was the source of the Starnes article.³³

Tightening the Screws

In the midst of this internecine conflict, McGeorge Bundy at the White House made the Station the exclusive instrument of an "urgent covert effort...to identify and build contacts with possible alternative leadership." The Ambassador should personally brief new Acting Chief of Station David Smith and receive his reports directly. Lodge and Smith were also consulting, at this point, on General Minh's demands for an unequivocal US stand on the generals' plan to force a change in government. Smith reported having recommended to Lodge that "we not set ourselves irrevocably against the assassination plot, since the other two alternatives mean either a bloodbath in Saigon or a protracted struggle which could rip the Army and the country asunder."³⁴

³² Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Memorandum for the Director, "Discussion with Kenneth Hansen of the Bureau of the Budget on the Situation in Saigon at the Time of His Visit," 24 October 1963,

³³ The Station also suspected Rufus Phillips, who became a bitter critic of the Diem regime during its last months, of complaining to the press about CIA for its failure to terminate all support to Colonel Tung and the Vietnamese Special Forces. SAIG 1434, 5 October 1963,

Kirkpatrick memorandum, "Discussion with Kenneth Hansen."
³⁴ CAP 63650, 5 October 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 379; SAIG 1447, 5 October 1963,

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Headquarters promptly countermanded this suggestion, telling Smith to advise the Ambassador that he was withdrawing it on McCone's instructions, because "we"—not further specified—could not actively condone assassination without "engaging our responsibility" for it. Meanwhile, Lodge had told State that he wanted to promise Minh that the US would not try to prevent a coup, and would continue aid to a government capable of mobilizing its people against the Viet Cong. He would avoid dealing with the assassination option by agreeing to review Minh proposals "other than assassination plans."³⁵ []

Still looking for ways to bring Diem to heel, the State Department now detailed the sanctions that Lodge should apply in order to generate political reforms and to intensify military action against the Viet Cong. For CIA, this meant suspending aid to Colonel Tung's forces "in or near Saigon." Lodge apparently thought this should apply to all the Station's paramilitary forces. The question was further muddled by Washington's insistence on seeing Colonel Tung's forces put under JGS control. On 7 October, after Smith asked for guidance, Colby told him to take into account the planned transfer of Station paramilitary units to MACV. Apparently wanting to avoid an imbroglio with Lodge over resources soon to be lost to the military, Colby advised Smith to refrain from "vigorous presentation" of his arguments for continued funding of the Station's paramilitary units and for their exemption from JGS control.³⁶ []

On 9 October, a State message in CIA channels confirmed Lodge's authority to tell the generals the US would not try to defeat a change of government that promised more effective prosecution of the war. The message also poignantly illustrated the dilemma created by the desire to know the content of the conspirators' plans without becoming identified with their actions. Conein was instructed to tell General Minh that Washington needed "detailed information clearly indicating that Minh's plans offer a high prospect of success." But at the same time, the Mission should "avoid being drawn into reviewing or advising on operational plans" or in any way associating the US with a change of government. Washington also worried about leaks, and Lodge's reply noted that he and Smith were considering State's proposal that they bring in someone less well known than Conein to deal with the generals.³⁷ []

³⁵ [] ibid.; SAIG 1448, 5 October 1963, []

³⁶ Dean Rusk, Telegram to the Embassy in Vietnam, 5 October 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 373-374; SAIG 1481, 7 October 1963, and []

³⁷ [] in *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 393-394; SAIG 1572, 10 October 1963, []

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On 11 October, Headquarters made it official: Richardson would not return to Saigon. Lodge reacted by telling Smith that he wanted the ACOS to take over. This prompted an anxious cable from Smith telling Headquarters that he was not maneuvering for the job and that he had assured Lodge that Headquarters would send someone else. On the operational level Smith was already preoccupied with a collection effort designed to meet Bundy's requirement of 5 October. His schedule of proposed contacts drew a nervous rejoinder from Colby, who thought that "pregnant probes" of oldline oppositionists entailed more risks than they were worth. The Station replied with assurances of its discretion, and the next Headquarters communication on coup coverage complained not about security but about the quantitative decline in Mission and Station reporting.³⁸ [redacted]

Contributing to reduced Station reporting was the suspension, mandated by Lodge, of Station contact with Ngo Dinh Nhu. The extent to which this quarantine may have affected Nhu's attitude cannot be known, but on 17 October he gave a defensive interview to the *Times of Vietnam*. Careful to maintain a statesmanlike tone, he recalled that he and CIA officials "had been working marvelously together in...the 'winning program'"—the Strategic Hamlet program—and speculated that only upon orders from their superiors had these officials incited the Buddhists to revolt. Nhu claimed to know the identities of six CIA agents engaged in this subversion, but hedged when asked if he would reveal them to a UN team scheduled to investigate the government's response to Buddhist unrest. Although he never made specific accusations he probably had indications of US collusion with the generals, in addition to the fantasy reporting from GVN security that alleged the presence of 50 Agency assassins in Saigon.³⁹ [redacted]

Nhu's failure to expose or arrest any of the real conspirators or their American contacts suggests that the operational security measures that Headquarters had continually urged on the Station were serving their purpose. But the inefficiencies created by these measures also contributed to the persisting uncertainty about the generals' aptitude for conspiracy and even their seriousness of purpose. One such instance arose when a courier designated by General Don told Conein on 16 October that at General Harkins' reception on 18 October either Minh or Don would ask Lodge to confirm that Conein spoke with his authority. Both Minh and Don attended, but neither mentioned Conein to the

³⁸ SAIG 1657, 12 October 1963, SAIG 1669, 14 October 1963; [redacted]
SAIG 1769, 17 October 1963, and SAIG 1849, 21 October 1963, all in *ibid.* [redacted]
³⁹ *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 416-418. [redacted]

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Ambassador. Don later claimed that the presence of too many MACV staff people had prevented him and Minh from raising the question, but in the meantime the two generals' reticence only intensified the confusion.⁴⁰

On the day of Harkins' reception, ACOS Smith and Brigadier General Richard Stilwell of MACV visited Secretary of State Nguyen Dinh Thuan to announce that the US was terminating military and CIA support for Vietnamese Special Forces units in the Saigon area; payments to units in the field would henceforth bypass Colonel Tung's headquarters. Three days later, on 21 October, they gave the same message directly to Tung who claimed to be hearing of this for the first time. Tung at first angrily threatened to dissolve several units if compelled to put them under JGS command. But he then acknowledged that he lacked the authority to do this, and the Americans suggested that he might do better to ask President Diem to raise the matter of command lines with Ambassador Lodge.⁴¹

A New Interlocutor and Crossed Signals

At this point, with no explanation, Tran Van Don replaced Tran Thien Khiem as the dissident generals' primary contact with the Station. On 23 October, Don summoned Conein to JGS for a meeting that revealed poor security on the Vietnamese side and crossed signals on the American. In an agitated state, Don described how General Harkins had the day before given him "cease and desist" orders with respect to coup planning. A colonel on Don's staff, Nguyen Khuong, had just advised an American officer that the Army would move against Diem on or about 27 October. When word of this reached Harkins, he called in General Don to insist that, with the war going well, this was no time for a coup.⁴²

Don told Conein that word of Khuong's approach had reached the Palace, which had reacted by prolonging the current field operations of two units essential to the coup, the 5th and 7th Divisions. With the entire enterprise in jeopardy, Don demanded an unequivocal statement of US intentions. Conein repeated his rather ambiguous guidance to the effect that the US "would not thwart a change of government or deny economic and military assistance" to a new government capable of winning popular support and improving the war effort and "working relationships with the US." For his part, Don wanted

⁴⁰ "Sequence of CAS Contacts," 23 October 1963; SAIG 1896, 23 October 1963,

⁴¹ Smith interview, 6 October 1992; *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 403-405, 424-425; David Smith, CSHP 57, *The Vietnam Coup d'Etat of November 1963 and its Aftermath* (hereafter cited as CSHP 57), p. 12.

⁴² SAIG 1896.

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Conein to assure Lodge that Khuong did not speak for the generals, and would be disciplined.⁴³ [redacted]

Conein challenged Don to prove that a coup committee or any coup plans actually existed. Don insisted that preparations were well advanced and promised to ask the committee's authority to give Conein its political organization plan. Anticipating approval, he arranged to meet Conein the next evening in downtown Saigon.⁴⁴ [redacted]

Lodge lost no time in getting Harkins's version of the cautionary advice that Don claimed to have received from him. Harkins admitted that Conein had accurately reported Don's statements, adding that his intention was to discourage approaches to his officers on political matters, and to focus attention on pursuing the war effort. Lodge briefed Harkins on the 9 October cable from Washington that had affirmed US willingness to acquiesce in a coup and reminded the general that he had concurred, back on 5 October, when the Ambassador proposed recommending this stance to the Department of State. Harkins said he had thought the US "was not now in favor of a coup," and Lodge repeated that he had instructions "from the highest levels" not to block a change of government. Harkins apologized for his interference and promised to withdraw his remarks to General Don.⁴⁵ [redacted]

Headquarters reacted to Conein's report with another exhortation to the Station to protect itself against entrapment. It worried about the "fuzz and looseness" of Don's coup committee, and about his ambiguous role on behalf of the Diem government. [redacted]

Meanwhile, Harkins had corrected the record with Don told Conein to arrange a brief contact at Saigon airport at 0630 hours on 24 October. Don said that Harkins had acknowledged inadvertently contravening a "presidential directive." Don volunteered to confirm personally to Lodge, when he saw the Ambassador that evening, the committee's desire to deal exclusively with Conein. Don then asked Conein to meet him later that day, in a dentist's office in downtown Saigon.⁴⁷ [redacted]

The Ambassador's appointment schedule included no meeting with General Don, and confusion on this point continued until that evening, when Don told

⁴³ Ibid. [redacted]

⁴⁴ Ibid. [redacted]

⁴⁵ SAIG 1906, 23 October 1963. [redacted]

⁴⁶ [redacted] ibid. [redacted]

⁴⁷ SAIG 1925, ibid. [redacted]

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Conein he had expected Lodge to be present at a session with MACV.⁴⁸ With respect to coup preparations, Don said at their evening session that the committee had refused on security grounds to turn over the promised political organization plan to the Americans. It had, however, agreed to share with the Ambassador its entire political and military planning two days before the coup. Conein reminded Don that any US endorsement depended on a judgment of the generals' plans, and Don repeated his promise, saying that the committee would launch the coup not later than 2 November.⁴⁹

Don named some of the membership of the coup committee, including Duong Van Minh, Pham Xuan Chieu, and Le Van Kim, but explicitly excluding Nguyen Khanh. He said Khanh was cooperating with the committee but not a member of it, and would "take his orders like everybody else." As for III Corps commander Ton That Dinh, he was "surrounded by committee members" and would either "cooperate or be crushed." Conein then turned to the committee's intentions regarding a new government. Don said it would be entirely civilian. He expected it to free non-Communist political prisoners and hold "honest elections." Political and religious freedom would be guaranteed, and the new regime would be pro-Western, but "not a vassal of the United States." Don promised to keep Conein fully informed, once the coup began, but cautioned against any American effort like the one in 1960 to restrain the generals from conclusive action. He assured Conein that the Ambassador would be in no danger when he traveled with Diem to Dalat on 27 October, but added that the committee now believed the "the entire Ngo family had to be eliminated from the political scene in Vietnam."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ The intensity of Washington's concern over the coup committee's authenticity and intentions is reflected in the personal attention of President Kennedy to Station cables such as this. Before Don could clarify the matter, McGeorge Bundy cabled the Mission, using this anomaly and Don's reference to a presidential directive to support his suspicion that the whole thing was a provocation by Nhu. Bundy seemed to overlook, in his anxiety, Harkins' confirmation of Don's account of their meeting, which included Harkins' reference to a presidential directive. (See SAIG 1925;

ibid.)

⁴⁹ SAIG 1956, 25 October 1963, ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

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Conein's meetings with General Don on 23 and 24 October suggested that the conspiracy against Diem had regained the momentum of late August. In addition, a penetration of Tran Kim Tuyen's coup committee, whose leaders included VC agent Pham Ngoc Thao reported that this group would attack the Palace as soon as the needed ammunition and transport had been assembled. This reporting generated a flurry of cables on 24 October which ended anticlimactically when Thao, contacted by a Station officer, disavowed any immediate intention to act. The Station also determined that Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Cao Ky, on whom the Thao-Lang group allegedly depended for air support, was still drinking beer with American officers at 1500 hours.¹

Helms now sent Smith a worried query about Conein. In addition to the usual concerns about provocation and Station officers' personal safety, Helms said that "some doubts [are] being expressed re Conein suitability for present role." This probably reflected Bundy's doubts about the authenticity of CIA's coup reporting, a question which Lodge was at that moment addressing in a cable to the White House. CIA was being "punctilious" in carrying out ambassadorial instructions, Lodge said, and while the Ambassador shared Bundy's concern about Conein's preeminent role, there was no suitable substitute.²

More generally, Lodge tried on 25 October to allay Bundy's fears of a Nhu provocation, saying that he believed the generals to be dealing with the US in good faith. If not, CIA was "perfectly prepared to have me disavow Conein at any time it may serve the national interest." Smith confirmed this in a cable to Headquarters in which he also resisted Headquarters' earlier suggestion that the Station secretly tape Conein's meetings: this, if discovered by Diem's

¹ *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 428-429. Tuyen, as noted earlier, had approached former DCOS

² and SAIG 1964, both 25 October 1963, in

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security forces, would confirm official US involvement in the conspiracy. In any case, Smith said, the Technical Services Division was unable to supply a recorder small enough for the purpose.³

Smith replied separately to Helms with assurances that he recognized all the dangers. But, he insisted, Conein's ability to read Don's sincerity constituted an irreplaceable asset, especially now, when action seemed imminent. The ACOS acknowledged, without specifying them, the "many advantages" to Nhu of a provocation. But like Lodge, he minimized the probability that Nhu could use General Don, let alone "Big Minh," as an instrument in such a ploy.⁴

Lodge's telegram prompted another agonized Oval Office meeting, this time with only the President, his brother the Attorney General, McNamara, Bundy, and McCone present. When McNamara and McCone disagreed over the accuracy of Conein's reporting President Kennedy used the opening to ask why the DCI looked unhappy with current policy. McCone did not miss this opportunity to predict that even a successful coup would probably lead to "an interregnum and a period of political confusion"—perhaps resulting in a second coup—or the chance that the war itself might be lost in the interim.⁵

President Kennedy heard McCone out and directed Bundy to cable Lodge expressing, as McCone recorded it, "our concern over the situation...[and] urging free and open talks with Diem." Bundy's five-sentence cable, as sent that evening, read rather differently. It noted the President's concern that the US would be blamed for a failed coup, and sought to reserve, if possible, "the option of judging and warning on any plan with poor prospects of success."⁶

One plan with such prospects seemed to be that of Pham Ngoc Thao. On 25 October, Huynh Van Lang reported further on Thao's tortuous efforts to mobilize ARVN support and to maintain the commitment of participants, like General Khiem, whom he thought too timid. Thao had succeeded, he claimed, in bringing a tank company into Saigon from the southern Mekong Delta. Lang's report also emphasized the various conspirators' shifting and overlapping alliances, saying that the exiled Can Lao chief Tran Kim Tuyen had put

³ SAIG 1965, 25 October 1963, *ibid.*

⁴ SAIG 1979, 26 September 1963, *ibid.*

⁵ McCone, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting with the President, McNamara, Attorney General, Bundy, myself, concerning South Viet Nam," 25 October 1963,

⁶ *Ibid.*; *FRUS 1961-1963, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 437.

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his own coup resources at Thao's disposition.⁷ Lang claimed also that the Military Security Service was trying to deceive the Palace, feeding it false information on coup plotting.⁸

While the anti-Diem conspirators wove their various plots, Ngo Dinh Nhu devised one of his own. As the Station later pieced it together, Nhu instructed Dinh to prepare a raid on Saigon by units based outside the city. The apparent insurrection, which was to include terrorist-style attacks on Americans, would then be put down by loyal forces commanded by Nhu and Dinh. The US would then see that the alternative to Diem was anarchy and endorse the government's hard line against the Buddhists. But the dissident generals had encouraged Dinh to request the Interior Ministry as a reward for his role in the pagoda raids. As they expected, Diem turned him down, and wounded vanity brought Dinh into their ranks before Nhu proposed his phony coup, which was thus compromised from the start.⁹

Final Preparations

On 27 October, General Don received Lodge's personal confirmation of Conein's "bona fides." The two met at Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon, where ironically Lodge was about to take off with President Diem to visit the presidential villa at the mountain resort of Dalat for what would prove to be fruitless discussions. Don emphasized the need for full Vietnamese control of the affair and declined to say when a coup might begin. Lodge asked Don to keep him informed, and in due course to furnish him the plans. Reporting all this to Washington, the Ambassador added that only he and Smith would have access to subsequent correspondence on the subject.¹⁰

Simultaneous visits to the same dentist on 28 October provided the cover for the next meeting between Don and Conein. After pro forma ministrations, the dentist withdrew to another part of the suite, and coup talk resumed. Don acknowledged confirmation from Lodge of Conein's credentials and emphasized that all other dealings between Americans and Vietnamese on coup arrangements should cease. Unable to determine what other dealings Don had in mind, Conein turned to the US need for more information. Ostensibly on

⁷ The available evidence does not establish whether Thao, as an agent of Hanoi, intended to promote a successful coup or was simply trying to intensify the prevailing confusion in order to weaken to VC advantage whatever government emerged. (See Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath* (Vintage Books, 1986), p. 51.

⁸ SAIG 1977, 26 October 1963,

⁹ CSHP 57, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ SAIG 2003, 28 October 1963, Embassy Saigon 805, 28 October 1963; *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 442-447.

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in mind, Conein turned to the US need for more information. Ostensibly on his own initiative, Conein asked Don to furnish the committee's plans in time for Lodge to study them before his scheduled 31 October trip to Washington. Don provided some order-of-battle information on the coup forces and insisted that Lodge would eventually get the full plans—not 48 hours in advance, as promised earlier. General Don could now offer only four hours' notice. Nothing would happen in the next two days, but Conein should wait at home starting in the evening on Wednesday, 30 October.¹¹

Conein did get Don's agreement to tighter communications security. The use of cutouts—Don's personal aide and a junior Station officer who lived in Conein's neighborhood—and radio would reduce the need for personal meetings between the two principals. Meetings would take place at prearranged sites, avoiding the participants' offices and homes.

Despite his injunction to Conein about unauthorized contacts, General Don could not prevent uncoordinated approaches to the Mission. These seem to have been directed almost exclusively to officers in the Station, which as noted earlier had for years cultivated a variety of contacts in the non-Communist opposition. When on 28 October Dai Viet politician Bui Diem asked his Station contact to confirm Conein's key role, the officer did so. Bui Diem responded by proclaiming himself a possible alternative channel to the military conspirators, should direct contact with them be disrupted. Another oppositionist, Dr. Dan Van Sung, spent the next evening describing to another Station officer how he and his allies visualized the structure of a new government and their role in it.¹³

Back in Washington, on 29 October, FE Division chief Bill Colby briefed the NSC on the coup plans. His judgment that the pro- and anti-Diem forces were roughly equal in strength provoked more argument among the President's lieutenants about the wisdom of backing the plot. McNamara, Taylor,

¹¹ SAIG 2023, 29 October 1963,

¹² SAIG 2042, 29 October 1963, *ibid.*; Stuart Methven, interview by Thomas L. Ahern, tape recording, Clifton, VA, 17 June 1995,

¹³ SAIG 2043, 29 October 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 488-490.

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and McCone, now joined by Robert Kennedy, argued again that ousting Diem was too risky. McCone reiterated his prediction that one coup would lead to another and result in political chaos.¹⁴ []

President Kennedy asked for more information on the correlation of forces and on the attitudes of Lodge and his team in Saigon. McGeorge Bundy wired Lodge that evening that the Station's reporting on contacts with Don, Bui Diem, and Sung had been "examined with care at highest levels," and that Washington did not believe that "presently revealed plans give clear prospect of quick results." Lodge should now share the plotting with General Harkins and provide a "combined assessment of their views, along with those of ACOS Smith."¹⁵ []

Lodge's reply did not object to sharing information with Harkins, but took vigorous exception to the President's idea of putting Harkins in charge during the Ambassador's proposed absence. To do this, he thought, "would probably be the end of any hope for a change of government here." Citing the new order-of-battle information provided by the Station, Lodge expressed confidence that the planned coup would succeed. He asserted that the US could not delay or discourage it []

That there was some basis for Lodge's apprehension about Harkins as coup manager can be seen in the General's perplexed message to Maxwell Taylor on the same day, 30 October. Harkins said he was aware that Don was involved in coup planning, and that he could not understand why the generals were talking to Conein and not to him. Early that evening, having seen and refused to concur in Lodge's reply to Bundy, he cabled Taylor opposing US participation in a coup without better evidence than he had seen that it would succeed. Meanwhile, Smith was working on a request from Helms for an independent assessment of the prospects for a successful coup. Avoiding any categorical prediction about the outcome of a coup, he replied that Diem seemed unlikely to defeat the VC "in the foreseeable future," and that his regime had "diminishing chances of survival."¹⁷ []

¹⁴ Bromley Smith, "Memorandum of a Conference with the President, White House, Washington, October 29, 1963, 4:20 p.m.," 29 October 1963, *FRUS 1961-1963, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 468-471; McCone, Memorandum for the Record, "Notes on Meeting at 4:00, Cabinet Room, re South Viet Num," 29 October 1963, []

¹⁵ Bundy cable to Lodge in CIA channels (cable number not declassified), 29 October 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 500. []

¹⁶ Ibid.; SAIG 2063, 30 October 1963, [] This is a sanitized version in *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 484-88. []

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 479-481, 499; [] and SAIG 2080, 30 October 1963, both in []

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While Headquarters and the Station struggled to identify pro-Diem and pro-coup forces, and determine the balance between them, Bundy used CIA communications to override Lodge's resistance to Harkins as contingent Acting Chief of Mission. Bundy also repudiated Lodge's assertion that the US now lacked any capacity to prevent a coup even if its prospects looked poor. He instructed Lodge to keep Harkins fully informed and consult him, along with Smith, in framing guidance for officers in contact with coup forces. Lodge replied curtly, "Thanks your sagacious instruction. Will carry out to best of my ability."¹⁸

Last-Minute Suspense

In Washington, William Colby now made one last effort to ensure a bloodless succession. He wrote to the DCI proposing that Ngo Dinh Nhu be installed in his brother's place. Colby cited no specific issues on which he thought Nhu would be more accommodating—the consensus of official US opinion tended to blame Nhu for Diem's intransigence—and scrupulously listed Nhu's weaknesses. These included the "fascist overtones" and "Potemkin village" pretensions of the Republican Youth, and Nhu's frequent inability to distinguish between identifying a goal and achieving it. But Nhu was a "strong, reasonably well oriented and efficient potential successor" whose principal liability—his "highly unfavorable public image"—we should help him to improve.¹⁹

Colby would presumably not have made such an audacious suggestion without some hope of its being taken seriously. But he had long confronted the prevailing distaste for Nhu in the State Department, and his catalog of Nhu's shortcomings tacitly acknowledged some basis for it. He must also have understood that the proposal implicitly repudiated the demand for Nhu's removal in the 24 August telegram from Washington that sparked the anti-Diem conspiracy.

When the momentum of coup preparations had become nearly irreversible, these factors, together with the timing of the idea, doubtless explain why Colby's proposal generated no support.

General Khiem had just canceled the armored support earlier promised to Pham Ngoc Thao, and Thao was now trying to replace it with a unit pledged to the Tran Kim Tuyen group. But

¹⁸ SAIG 2094, 31 October 1963; all in *ibid.*

¹⁹ William Colby, Memorandum for the Director of Central Intelligence, "Leadership in Vietnam—Ngo Dinh Nhu," n.d., *ibid.* This document is filed with material dated 30 and 31 October 1963.

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unknown to Thao, his intermediary with the armored squadron commander was reporting to the Station. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] But the Vietnamese did not move, and the Station could only resume its watch. As he waited, Conein pondered the Ambassador's recent remark that if nothing happened and he were actually to make his scheduled trip to Washington, he would see to it that Conein never worked another day for the US Government.²¹ [redacted]

Early in the morning on 1 November, the MACV Chief of Staff, Major General Richard Stilwell, invited David Smith to drop by at his office. While detailed to the Agency some years before, Stilwell had been Smith's first supervisor, and he wanted now to offer the ACOS some friendly advice. To save himself and the Agency from serious embarrassment, Smith should stop disseminating coup predictions. Stilwell had conducted individual debriefings of his key field advisors to the Vietnamese military. These men, he said, [redacted] and not one had heard a whisper about a military coup. He could confidently assert that there would be none in the foreseeable future; he and General Harkins were briefing the visiting Admiral Harry Felt, Commander in Chief Pacific, to this effect.²² [redacted]

As it happened, a courtesy call on President Diem that same morning was the last item on Felt's agenda. Ambassador Lodge was present, and Diem complained to him about junior CIA officers, one of them named Hodges, who were "poisoning [the] atmosphere by spreading rumors of coups about him." Hodges, he charged, had told the general staff that the Seventh Fleet would land troops if the government acted on its plan to stage a demonstration against the American Embassy.²³ Diem also insisted that the ARVN General Staff had deployed the Special Forces units that raided the pagodas on

²⁰ SAIG 2115, 31 October 1963, ibid. [redacted]

²¹ [redacted], memo [redacted]

[redacted] Conein interview, 24 June 1992. [redacted]

²² Smith interview, 6 October 1992. [redacted]

²³ Diem may have been referring to Paul Hodges, chief of the Station's liaison section. But no record has been found of any Hodges contact with JGS at this time, let alone any confirmation of Diem's accusation. [redacted]

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21 August; all such units were under JGS command, and the US was wrong when it cut off aid to them.²⁴

The President kept Lodge briefly after the formal session with another complaint, this time about American incitement of the Buddhist clergy. Lodge promised to expel any American found guilty of such impropriety, and Diem went on to talk about Communist subversion of university students. Reverting to the suspension of aid to his Special Forces, he criticized some of General Harkins' subordinates, describing the departed John Paul Vann as "very imprudent."²⁵

In this meeting on the morning of 1 November, Diem went on to talk about Cabinet changes, lamenting that when it came to candidates, "nobody could give him any names." Then, knowing that Lodge planned a trip to Washington, Diem begged him to ask Mr. Colby or Ambassador Nolting about Nhu. Describing Nhu exactly as he had once spoken of Ngo Dinh Can, Diem insisted that although his younger brother had no interest in power, he so overflowed with solutions to difficult problems that everyone asked for his advice. As for himself, Diem wanted to be described to President Kennedy as a "good and frank ally" who would rather try to settle questions now than "after we have lost everything." Lodge thought that Diem, fearing a rebellion, might be signaling some willingness to meet US demands. With this in mind, and perhaps not taking it for granted that the generals would in fact move against Diem, he proposed to discuss a "package deal" when he arrived in Washington.²⁶

Action

Otherwise, the city was so quiet that the Station reported that the morning had been "more nearly normal than at any time since May 8th [the date of the first Buddhist incident]." Then, at 1330 hours, it suddenly fired off a cable at flash precedence reporting "red neckerchief troops pouring into Saigon from direction Bien Hoa, presumably marines." General Don had just sent his aide to inform Conein that the coup was under way, and to ask him to come to JGS Headquarters, the coup command post,

The dentist who had covered the 28 October meeting with Don also showed up, bearing the same message. Don had tried all morning to call, but Conein's telephone had failed.

²⁴ Henry Cabot Lodge, Telegram to the Department of State, 1 November 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 515.

²⁵ Embassy Saigon 841, 1 November 1963,

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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[REDACTED]

Conein stayed at JGS Headquarters until the next day, relaying by phone to the Station what Generals Don and Minh were telling him, and observing for himself the management of the coup. Other Station officers were on the street, describing the execution of the orders emanating from JGS. Together, Conein and these officers supplied nearly all of the authoritative information on the coup that Washington received in the next 24 hours. Conein, to begin with, reported the arrest of Diem loyalists in the military, including Special Forces chief Colonel Le Quang Tung and the commanders of the Marines, Air Force, and Civil Guard. He added that the Navy chief had been killed that morning in a "premature action."²⁸ [REDACTED]

Meanwhile, Station observers downtown reported a fire at the Palace. One of them risked a vantage point close enough to allow a rough count of the approximately 200 rebel troops at the Palace; another officer reported 35 armored vehicles headed that way. Conein advised that the generals were trying, so far unsuccessfully, to reach the Palace by telephone in order to offer Diem safe conduct in return for surrender. Determined to avoid a repetition of Diem's manipulation of the 1960 mutineers, the generals did not intend to let him argue: "He will either say yes or no." Meanwhile, they made preparations for an air attack and monitored a broadcast by the government radio claiming that the insurgents had been arrested.²⁹ [REDACTED]

Having neutralized Diem's loyalists in the military, the committee felt confident enough by mid-afternoon to start talking to Conein about political arrangements. The principal civilian oppositionists had already assembled at JGS Headquarters, and Conein was now told that the new government would be exclusively civilian. But Diem and Nhu were still holed up at Gia Long Palace, and dislodging them took first priority. The Embassy, at this point, clouded the issue when it claimed in an unsourced report that the generals refused to deal directly with Diem, and wanted the Embassy to deliver their ultimatum. Conein was reporting the contrary, that Minh had just spoken to

²⁷ SAIG 2111 and SAIG 2130, 1 November 1963. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The following account of the coup is drawn, except where otherwise stated, from a series of cables—SAIG 2131 through 2152 [REDACTED] *ibid.*—that are hereafter cited as "Coup Chronology." For the situation report, see CSHP No. 9, *History of the Vietnamese Generals' Coup of 1-2 November 1963: Saigon Station Log and Analysis, October-November 1963*, p. 9. Saigon Station officers assembled the paper. [REDACTED]

²⁸ "Coup Chronology." [REDACTED]

²⁹ *Ibid.* [REDACTED]

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Nhu—Diem was “allegedly not present”—and had forced Colonel Tung and other Diem loyalists to tell Nhu that they were in rebel hands. Minh told Nhu that he had five minutes to surrender in order to avoid a “massive air bombardment.”³⁰

General Dinh got on the phone, violently threatening and cursing Diem and Nhu. Another officer explained this display to Conein as designed to persuade Nhu that Dinh was no longer leading a phony coup, but had joined a genuine rebellion. Nhu apparently wanted to believe that Dinh was still merely playing his part in the charade designed to persuade the US of Diem’s indispensability.³¹

At 1630 hours Diem phoned Lodge. The President said that some units had rebelled and asked, “What is the attitude of the US?” Lodge replied that a paucity of information and the absence of guidance from Washington prevented him from having a view. Diem persisted, reminding Lodge that he was, after all, a chief of state, and one who had always tried to do his duty. Lodge assured Diem of his great regard for the President’s courage and for his service to his country. Now, Lodge said, he was concerned about Diem’s safety. Had Diem heard that “those in charge of the current activity” were offering him and Nhu safe conduct out of the country if he resigned? Diem said no, then, after a pause, “You have my telephone number.” Lodge begged to be advised of anything he could do to ensure the President’s safety. Diem responded, “I am trying to reestablish order.”³²

General Minh succeeded in reaching the Palace by phone at about 1700 hours, but the President finished by hanging up on him. Minh told Conein he had just ordered an air attack on the Palace. This took place in half-hearted and inconclusive fashion, and two hours later Minh gave Diem another ultimatum: if he did not surrender, Minh would “blast him off the face of the earth.” Meanwhile, the generals asked through Conein if they could see dissident Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang, who had taken refuge in the Embassy during the pagoda raids—they wanted to offer him a position as Buddhist advisor to the new government. Lodge replied in characteristically regal fashion that the “generals will be received at the Embassy” after the coup: “I expect to receive them myself.” But he thought it best that they see Tri Quang outside the Embassy.³³

³⁰ Embassy Saigon 853, 1 November 1963, “Coups Chronology.”

³¹ Lucien Conein, interview by author, tape recording, McLean, VA, 3 February 1993 (hereafter cited as Conein interview, 3 February 1993).

³² Embassy Saigon 860, 1 November 1963, *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 513.

³³ “Coups Chronology;” *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 522.

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At 2020 hours, having failed to intimidate Diem with a barrage of 105mm artillery fire, Minh ordered a battalion of infantry supported by armor to assault the Palace. At this point, there had apparently been no evacuation of official Americans, as one Station employee living near the Palace called in to report that all his windows had been blown out. By 2200 hours, Station observers were reporting the advance on the Palace, and a confrontation with Diem forces numbering 17 tanks and some 400 troops. During the ensuing impasse—the coup committee apparently wanted to avoid a bloody shootout with its compatriots—Station reporting gave renewed attention to personalities and politics. Either unaware of or repudiating Minh's guarantee of a civilian government, General Le Van Kim, the committee's liaison with the civilian politicians, had "decided" that a military junta would have to precede civilian rule. But Conein felt close enough to the proceedings at JGS Headquarters to be confident that General Minh was in fact in charge, with Tran Van Don firmly established in the second position, and Tran Thien Kheim serving as chief of operations.³⁴

The generals' vacillation on political arrangements produced yet another formula, and by 0300 hours on 2 November they were proposing a mixed government with Diem's Vice President, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, as the new prime minister and several generals in Cabinet positions. Once again, however, political deliberations were interrupted by military developments, as fighting intensified around the Palace.³⁵

The Demise of the House of Ngo

At 0620 hours, Diem called Tran Van Don at JGS headquarters, offering to surrender if promised safe conduct out of the country. Generals Don and Kheim told Conein they would need a US aircraft for this, and Conein called the Embassy, where David Smith said that France seemed the country most likely to promise asylum, and it would take 24 hours to bring in an aircraft with enough range to avoid any intermediate stops between Saigon and Paris. Conein relayed this to the generals, including General Minh, who seemed unhappy about the delay. At this point, Diem had ordered his forces to cease fire, and Minh now left JGS headquarters headed for the Palace.³⁶ At 0800 hours, a Station observer posted at the Palace reported a military escort

³⁴ "Coup Chronology."

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.; blind memorandum, "The Anti-Diem Coup," n.d., prepared by Lucien Conein, National Archives—Nixon Project, copy in History Staff files; Lucien Conein, interview by Edward Keefer, 19 April 1984 (hereafter cited as Conein interview, 19 April 1984), copy in History Staff files.

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waiting outside for Diem and Nhu.³⁷ By 1000 hours, it began to look to the Station as if the President and his brother had escaped, and Headquarters called for reporting in the emergency Critic channel until their fate was firmly established.³⁸

When General Minh left JGS headquarters at about 0630 hours, Conein returned to the Embassy. There he got instructions to get back to the generals to pursue the question of Diem's well-being, and to urge the generals not to arrest labor leader Tran Quoc Buu. Conein returned to JGS around 1100 hours to find Minh now back from his trip to the Palace. The question of safeconduct for Diem and Nhu now became moot, as Minh acknowledged that both were dead. He alleged that the brothers had committed suicide in a Catholic church, to which Conein responded that someone had better construct a more plausible story.³⁹

But if the Ngo brothers could no longer be helped, the Mission would still like Buu to be left alone. Conein conveyed this to Minh, provoking a complaint that the Americans were already giving orders. Despite Conein's representations, Buu was subsequently arrested and briefly detained.⁴⁰

At noon on 2 November, still lacking any facts beyond Minh's statement to Conein, the Station told CIA Headquarters it thought Diem and Nhu were probably dead. Whatever the brothers' whereabouts and their personal welfare, Smith added, it was now clear that their regime had fallen, and people had "poured into the streets in [an] exhilarated mood," giving fruit to soldiers and burning down the headquarters of Madame Nhu's Women's Solidarity Movement. Then, in the afternoon, Generals Big Minh, Don, and Kim separately offered to let Conein view the bodies of Diem and Nhu. Conein declined, fearing the "generals would think he [was] taking grisly relish in his part" in the coup. Conein now accepted as fact, however, that the President and his brother were dead.⁴¹

³⁷ In his 1979 memoirs, Tran Van Don says that the rebels captured the Palace at about 0545 hours, and found Diem and Nhu gone. He claims that when Diem called him at 0620 hours he acknowledged being in Cholon. Unless Minh was also deceiving the rest of the coup committee, this account leaves unexplained the military escort waiting for Diem at the Palace more than two hours later, Don's failure at the time to inform Conein of the brothers' whereabouts, and Minh's departure for the Palace after Diem's call. (See Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 107.)

³⁸ "Coup Chronology."

³⁹ Conein interview, 7 December 1989; "The Anti-Diem Coup."

⁴⁰ Conein interview, 7 December 1989; "The Anti-Diem Coup."

⁴¹ "Coup Chronology."

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DCI McCone applauded Conein's restraint, but at the same time demanded more information on the manner of the Ngo brothers' demise. Station reporting was to be used in a meeting with President Kennedy at 1630 hours, Washington time, and the fate of Diem and Nhu remained a matter of the greatest concern. At this point, the Station could say only that Conein thought the bodies to be at JGS headquarters, and that he believed General Minh to have ordered the executions. Minh's "show of angry passion" when Diem at first refused to take his phone call, and later hung up on him, was one factor. Conein also noted Minh's earlier speculation that the Ngo brothers would commit suicide and interpreted his removal of telephones from the command post, after Diem's agreement to surrender, as designed to frustrate inquiries about the brothers' fate.⁴² [redacted]

While the Station struggled to confirm the circumstances of the Ngo brothers' deaths, CIA Headquarters called on it to help influence the composition and programs of the new government. The Station should propose to the Ambassador its favored candidates for government office and identify people it thought should be excluded. With respect to influence on the Vietnamese, Headquarters said nothing about direct representations to the generals, [redacted]

[redacted] Headquarters added the names of 19 civilians it favored for inclusion in the new government, but cautioned that it had not coordinated the list with State, and Smith should present it to the Ambassador as his own.⁴³ [redacted]

[redacted]

Meanwhile, the search continued for information on the deaths of Diem and Nhu. On 3 November, an occasional Station source showed his case officer photographs of the brothers' bloodstained bodies lying with hands tied behind their backs on the floor of an armored personnel carrier. The source claimed to have obtained the pictures from the ARVN photographer who took them. He had also learned that Diem and Nhu were captured at a Catholic church in

⁴² Ibid. [redacted]

⁴³ [redacted] A marginal note with Colby's initials says, "Cleared this message in principle (no names) with Hilsman." [redacted]

⁴⁴ [redacted]

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Cholon, the Chinese district of Saigon. Most Station reporting attributed the assassination decision to Duong Van Minh, but some subsequent reports blamed it variously on suspected French agent General Mai Huu Xuan, the coup committee as a whole, and the officer in command of the detail sent to capture the Ngo brothers. The only detail on which these reports do not disagree is that the murders were carried out by an officer named Nhung, himself variously described as Minh's bodyguard and as a devoted supporter of Mai Huu Xuan.⁴⁵ []

The ignominious demise of Diem and Nhu shocked and dismayed President Kennedy, who according to Maxwell Taylor's account leaped to his feet and rushed from the meeting which Michael Forrestal had interrupted to announce their deaths. John Richardson and David Smith had separately warned Lodge and Headquarters of the high risk that Diem would not survive a military coup. But the event shocked Washington, to the extent that Smith thought Headquarters' reaction almost hysterical.⁴⁶ []

Dismay at the brutal treatment of Diem and Nhu generated a panicky concern for the safety of the Nhu children. President Kennedy enjoined McCone to ensure their safe conduct to their mother, then in Europe. General Don had told Conein that he had the children in his care; he said he wanted only to be helpful, and travel arrangements were completed at a meeting that included Lodge and "Big Minh." But there remained some doubt about the general's good intentions, and Lodge had one of his aides, Fred Flott, accompany the children and a nurse to Rome. At the Saigon airport, Conein instructed the pilot that once airborne he should ignore any orders from the tower to return to Ton Son Nhut or to proceed anywhere else than to the first scheduled stop, at Bangkok. No one tried to divert the airplane, and the children were safely delivered over to Bishop Thuc in Rome.⁴⁷ []

⁴⁵ "Coup Chronology"; unsigned memorandum to William Colby, "Circumstances of the Deaths of Diem and Nhu," n.d., and unsigned Memorandum for the Record, "Description of the Death of President Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu," 18 November 1963, both in []

[] unsigned Memorandum for the Record, "Colonel Anh Ba and Major General Mai Huu Xuan," 28 July 1975 [] Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War*, p. 112; Conein interview, 19 February 1992. []

⁴⁶ Taylor's account is quoted in *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, p. 533; Smith interview, 6 October 1992. []

⁴⁷ *FRUS, 1961-63, IV, Vietnam, August-December 1963*, pp. 546-549; [] [] Conein interview, 19 February 1992. []

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Full Circle

Not only the Viet Cong, but a variety of non-Communist opponents, had always denied the legitimacy of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. Less a juridical question than one of moral and political authority, it was finally decided in the negative when Washington concluded that Diem's repression of Buddhist dissent had irrevocably alienated too many of the people he needed to fight the Communists. Planning for the coup thus concentrated on his removal, leaving the shape of new political arrangements for the future. But the military junta that the US encouraged to install itself in his place had even less claim than Diem to any popular mandate. Along with the rest of the US Government, the CIA thus found itself starting from the beginning again in the perennial effort to instill in the Vietnamese leadership and the Southern population at large a sense of common purpose. The increasing militarization of the conflict complicated matters, but in its political aspect the problem remained identical to the one first confronted by the Agency's two Saigon Stations in July 1954.

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~~SECRET//X1~~**CHAPTER 15***A Doomed Experiment*

During his nine years as Prime Minister and then President of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem could call for help on all the agencies of the US Government represented in Saigon. Although the scale of material aid from CIA was dwarfed by that furnished by the economic and military aid missions, it is fair to say that the Agency played a central role in preserving Diem in power, especially during his first year. No other arm of the US devoted as much effort to helping him prevail over his numerous enemies, and no other agency dedicated both advice and material support to a long term effort to create popular government south of the 17th parallel.

CIA support for the Saigon government reflected not a self-imposed policy agenda but the energy and self-confidence of an Agency which, at the outset of the enterprise in 1954, enjoyed the Eisenhower administration's favor as an action instrument in the conduct of the Cold War. This confidence and energy, abetted by a broad presidential charter for both intelligence collection and covert action, resulted in relationships with politically significant Vietnamese across the entire non-Communist political spectrum. The single most important of these was certainly the relationship with Ngo Dinh Nhu, but the Agency also dealt directly with Ngo Dinh Diem, and maintained contacts of some degree of influence and trust with other figures ranging from Buddhist monks to opposition politicians to military and police officers. This study of the record of the Agency's experience with Diem's government thus reveals both the roots of the regime's failure and the inability of CIA support, and that of the US Government as a whole, to prevent that collapse.

The principal conclusion that emerges from this study thus confirms the judgment of the early pessimists in CIA and elsewhere who predicted that Ngo Dinh Diem could not defeat a Hanoi-directed Southern insurgency. These observers saw precisely the personality flaws and the reliance on foreign support—the latter an anomaly that the intensely nationalistic Diem seems never to have recognized—that characterized his entire time in office. He had, of course, no choice in the early months of his regime but to depend on his Agency contacts to suborn his local adversaries and on John Foster Dulles to

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intimidate the French; he had, after all, been installed by foreigners without any reference to indigenous popular preferences. Had he nevertheless possessed the vision to articulate a constructive political program, and been able to build the administrative machinery to implement it, he might have used this period to his long term advantage.

The villagers' surprisingly positive initial response to Diem's occupation of the Viet Minh zones in 1955 suggests that this constituted a genuine option. To succeed, Diem would of course have had to attract the loyalty of the non-Communist nationalists who had earlier cooperated with the Viet Minh against the French. Then, he would have faced the need to transform the ossified colonial bureaucracy into a functioning servant of his political and economic agenda. But Diem never tested this approach. Instead, he chose an essentially repressive strategy for the consolidation and expansion of his government's control. Its effect was to "dry the grass," as Mao had put it, intensifying peasant alienation from the government while it built for Diem the image of a reactionary mandarin dependent on foreign support for the survival of his nepotistic government.

Diem's reliance on family and personal loyalists to project his authority, together with the arbitrary quality of his governing style, reduced almost to nil the prospects of American-sponsored institution-building and political reform. The energetic and well-intentioned but uncoordinated efforts of the two early CIA Stations may actually have cancelled each other out, but there is no reason to believe that by speaking with one voice they would have converted Diem to a more progressive, politically inclusive approach.

For one thing, the shortage of talent that led the US to see no alternative to Diem limited Diem's own options. Other than the non-Communists who had supported the Viet Minh against the French, he had just three potential sources of allies: the secular political parties, the religious sects, and his own military and civilian bureaucracy. He and Nhu may well have been right in dismissing all three as partners in a joint political enterprise, for the sect and party leaders were nearly all concerned solely to advance their own parochial interests. They wanted to replace Diem, or at least tame him, not work with or for him. And the lethargic, city-bound bureaucracy, shaped by the French to serve French interests, offered even less promising material for a reformist administration.

In any case, Diem's sense of entitlement to his office ruled out any sharing of either policymaking or executive power. CIA people, even Diem advocates like Ed Lansdale, recognized this authoritarian bent early on. Some, usually junior officers, concluded well before 1963 that Diem's governing style, unaccompanied by the pervasive controls of a totalitarian regime, must eventually lead to failure. But most CIA officials in Vietnam, however they might

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deplore Diem's failure to exploit his opportunities to win the consent of the governed, reacted to Diem's rigidities with the response that dominated US judgments until 1963: "there's nobody else." Like official Washington as a whole, they persisted in hoping that improved organizational efficiency, buttressed by US advice and material support, would suffice to contain the insurgency.

It is conceivable that this formula would have worked if Diem had appealed to the non-Communist adherents of the Viet Minh to participate in the political and economic development of the countryside. This would, of course, have risked sabotage by Communist infiltrators, and the requisite land reform would have alienated the Westernized elite, which constituted the most anti-Communist constituency outside the government itself. Such a policy would also have involved some devolution of authority, rather than the paternalistically hierarchical system that Diem in fact imposed.

Whatever its theoretical merits, a political system conceived along these lines held no attraction for Diem, and it might have looked dangerously socialistic to US officials, had he ever proposed it. But Diem seems in fact to have found Ed Lansdale's egalitarian, quasi-Jeffersonian notions simply incomprehensible. He proceeded to follow his instinct, which was to reward loyalty and to punish even the suspicion of disobedience. Unfortunately for his hold on office, his rural administration failed to replace Viet Minh influence with that of Saigon. The near-destruction of the Communist apparatus in the countryside, between 1955 and 1959, resulted not in the consolidation of Saigon's control, but in the creation of a political no-man's land.

Flawed Logic and the Influence of Ideology

As the insurgency advanced after 1959, American officials looking for a response to it framed their discussions almost exclusively in disjunctive terms. One side insisted that Diem's continued tenure doomed the South to absorption by the Communists. The other saw his continuation in office as indispensable to the defeat of the insurgency. Nowhere in the records examined for this study does any of the participating US officials acknowledge, up to 1963, that these propositions might both be valid. Whatever the possibilities in 1955, it is possible that by 1963 the conflict could not be won either with Diem or without him. That is, it could not be won at all, or at least not at any politically sustainable level of American commitment.¹ Even after 1963, this fleeting insight never invaded the collective consciousness of policymakers and program man-

¹ The author served in Vietnam in the last months of the regime, and participated in numerous discussions. During none of them did anyone—himself included—recognize that both sides might be right.

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agers; it was replaced, after the demise of the Diem regime, by the renewed conviction that American programs and American resources needed only a responsive Vietnamese leadership to mobilize a presumptively anti-Communist population.

Here one must deal with the influence of ideology on practical judgment. Agency and other US officials were indeed, at the beginning, skeptical of Diem's capabilities and prospects. But by 1957, with the residual Viet Minh organization reduced to nuisance proportions, Diem emerged as the embodiment of American faith in anti-Communism as the foundation of counterinsurgency in the third world. As a result, US judgment of the balance of forces, as the Communists usefully put it, was perpetually flawed by the assumption that Diem's citizenry saw the alternatives in much the same terms as Americans did—either the Southern insurgents and their masters in Hanoi or the Diem regime and its benevolent US sponsors. In his own way, Diem fell victim to the same misperception, attributing to his people an antipathy for Communism comparable to his own, or at least a disposition to accept his wisdom in the matter.

But up to 1963, at least, few Vietnamese of the Buddhist-Confucian majority appear to have regarded the conflict as one between Communism and freedom, or between Communism and democracy. The politically active among them had other concerns, among these, nationalism tinged with xenophobia, social reform—skillfully if cynically exploited by the Viet Cong—and, even for non-Communists among the veterans of the war against the French, simple protection from Diem's police. CIA and other US officials' preoccupation with Communism allowed them to underestimate the power of these concerns and thus to dismiss Buddhist dissidence, peasant resistance to Strategic Hamlets, and the pervasive incompetence of the regime as either irrelevant or as remediable by a program of military and police repression.

If the ubiquity of CIA officers in Vietnam did not lead to an understanding of the Buddhist leadership or of peasant psychology, this reflected not lack of energy or access but rather the prevailing mindset which classified all Vietnamese into three groups, namely, anti-Communist patriots, their Communist adversaries, and fence-sitters—deluded, self-interested, or timid. South Vietnamese without a personal stake in Diem's regime appear to have defined the struggle in quite different terms. These always included the Chinese notion of the "mandate of heaven," that is, legitimacy earned by demonstrating the capacity to govern. This gap in perceptions of the nature of the conflict in Vietnam prevented the Agency, and more generally the US, from recognizing the implications of Diem's self-defeating reliance on the two instruments of family government repression and indiscriminate repression.

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Repression meant government by fear, at least where the government found its authority directly challenged by the Viet Cong. In order to keep the disaffected on the defensive, this approach required not only ruthlessness but disciplined effectiveness—a quality denied the Diem regime by its reliance on nepotism and by the sycophantic incompetence of its officials. Indeed, a theme that pervades the entire course of Agency dealings with the Ngo family and its retainers is the regime's irredeemable ineffectiveness in all matters except the pursuit of suspect Communists. But even in his greatest achievement—decimating the Communist stay-behind organization before 1960—Diem's indiscriminate violence stimulated precisely the resistance he intended to suppress.

The reliance on anti-Communist ideology both to explain the insurgency and to motivate resistance to it accounts for otherwise inexplicable idiosyncrasies in the Agency's approach to the Diem regime. The Station officers who managed the never-ending experiment in political training for Nhu's National Revolutionary Movement consistently abdicated any role in supplying its political content. Their one-note dependence on the theme of resistance to Communist aggression was reinforced by the absence of prospects for rural reform, especially in the matter of land tenure. Diem's disinclination to challenge his landowning constituency left this domain to the Communists, and neither the CIA nor other US officials ever actively questioned the sufficiency of his occasional cosmetic reforms. As for the structure of government, CIA and other advocates of the regime rationalized the hollowness of the regime's nominally democratic institutions even while they kept pressing Diem and Nhu to allow them to function.

The perennial absence of a concrete political program—Colby's quixotic effort of late 1960, when he invited Diem to deploy his legislature against his own executive, may be seen as an exception—led to another aberration, small but illustrative, in the Agency's efforts on behalf of the regime. This was the substitution of appearance for substance in a series of proposals to treat the regime's problems as the result not of incompetence or repression or corruption but of poor public relations. These began with the 1955 Headquarters suggestion of elocution lessons for Diem, and they resumed in the 1960s with the correspondence between Bill Colby and John Richardson on getting Diem and Nhu to write about themselves. In retrospect, initiatives like these cannot be seen as anything but counsels of unacknowledged desperation.

Clientitis and Demonization

Another issue raised by the Agency's relationship with the Diem regime is the effect on intellectual objectivity of a commitment to achieving an operational goal. It seems likely that any such effect declines with distance from the

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operational scene, and that Headquarters was less vulnerable to it than officers in the field. But there is little doubt that the twin perils of "clientitis"—an uncritical commitment to one's clients, and demonization of their opposition—sometimes clouded the judgment of officers who were in direct contact with the Ngo brothers or otherwise engaged in efforts to strengthen and reform their government.

Although constantly frustrated by Diem's intransigence, Edward Lansdale neither wavered in his support, nor entertained the idea that the President might be simply incapable of meeting the challenge. It is difficult to avoid the inference that this loyalty represented an emotional commitment to the success of his own project, to turn Diem into the revered father of his country, rather than the fruit of detached analysis. Later Chiefs of Station, William Colby and John Richardson, also fell victim to this clientitis, their protégé being Diem's brother Nhu. Just as Lansdale recognized Diem's reactionary bent, Colby recognized Nhu's penchant to substitute theory for performance, but Colby never abandoned his advocacy of Nhu's counterinsurgency prescription. Richardson was even less detached, declaring his agreement with even the more convoluted of Nhu's pronouncements.

This emotional commitment contained the seeds of a serious distortion of the intelligence process. Fortunately for the integrity of that process, such an effect was mitigated by accidents of personality and circumstance. In the case of Ed Lansdale, unstinting support to Diem constituted his mandate; Headquarters never looked to him for a coolly balanced assessment of the regime's prospects. Even in the crucial episode of April 1955, when Agency witness overcame General Collins's opposition to Diem, Lansdale's advocacy was supported by the regular Station, always less persuaded than he was of Diem's leadership potential.

By late 1960, with William Colby as COS, a balanced assessment of Diem's staying power had become a continuous and urgent requirement. Given the strength of their convictions, both Colby and Richardson might understandably have sought to restrict the dissemination of what they regarded as wrong-headed criticism. In fact, there is no indication that either ever succumbed to the temptation to make the Station speak with one voice on such a controversial subject. Instead, they respected the skepticism of their subordinates by disseminating the complaints that streamed in from the non-Communist opposition—to which many of these officers subscribed.

Another threat to objectivity came in the form of the impulse to find a scapegoat for the regime's failure to effect American-sponsored reforms. Here, Agency officers sometimes entertained the prejudice against Ngo Dinh Nhu that many Foreign Service officers had adopted from the French. Lansdale's comparison of Nhu with Mussolini reflects not a sober assessment but

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the intense frustration produced by Diem's intractability. FE Division at Headquarters also absorbed this bias, as demonstrated over the years in a series of injunctions to the Station to get rid of Nhu. Even when it represented no more than a rhetorical tic, blaming Nhu allowed his detractors to avoid the unpleasant implications of a judgment that Diem had failed.

Finally, the Agency experience with the Ngo brothers and their entourage demonstrated the central dilemma of any nation-building enterprise in a former European colony during the Cold War. CIA and other US officials always recognized the popular appeal of the nationalist pretensions of even Communist-led Third World revolutionary movements. Lansdale and Colby, especially, laid great stress on this point, insisting on impeccable nationalist credentials as a condition of the legitimacy of any candidate for leadership in Vietnam. But they and others also expected Diem and Nhu to accept US advice on the style and substance of governance. When these clients demonstrated their independence by pursuing patently self-destructive policies, the dilemma prevented any decisive remedial action; the only alternative left was to resume looking for a leadership which would accept American prescriptions while preserving its own autonomy.

As it turned out, the generals who overthrew Diem first tried to cut the Gordian knot by abdicating the "political part" to their CIA advisors. But this led to a confrontation on the very day of Diem's death, when General Minh discovered that deferring to the Americans on political matters meant doing things he did not want to do. We will see in the sequel to this story of Diem family rule that the CIA continues to be centrally involved in this question of "leverage" as the US pursues its effort to shape the policies and programs of a client but sovereign state.

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The files of the Directorate of Operations comprise the single most important source of the material used in this study. Voluminous cable and dispatch correspondence between Headquarters and the field provides a fairly comprehensive record of the activities of the two Stations in Saigon from 1954 to 1956, and of the unified Station thereafter.

Supplementing this are interviews with DO officers who served at the time either in Saigon or at Headquarters. Some of these interviews were conducted in 1963 and 1964 as part of an historical project intended to provide a record of Agency involvement in Vietnam. Other interviews have been conducted by the author since 1989.

Studies done as part of the Clandestine Services Historical Paper series have also been useful, especially those dealing with the Lansdale Station, the Saigon Liaison Mission, and the secret rebellion of early 1955.

Where Agency material needs to be placed in broader context, the study draws on other sources, all unclassified. The most important of these are the relevant volumes in the Department of State's documentary series, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, with their emphasis on diplomatic correspondence. Other published accounts provide additional background and fill in a few remaining gaps.

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